Town Hall Tales

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Town Hall Tales

Culture as storytelling in local government

Gehoord op het gemeentehuis

De verhalende cultuur van het lokaal bestuur

Proefschrift ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor aan de
Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam
op gezag van de rector magnificus

Prof.dr. S.W.J. Lamberts

en volgens besluit van het College voor Promoties

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All research has a history and is supported in various ways. The history of this dissertation project can be located at the moment the Centre for Local Democracy was asked to research the governing culture of the municipality of Volendam, the Netherlands. After the study in Volendam, the Department of Public Administration of the Erasmus University in Rotterdam offered me the opportunity to research governing culture in Dutch local government. Later on the Strategic Research Unit of the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations proved to be willing to finance a part of the project. In addition I made use of the opportunities offered by the Netherlands Institute of Government. The empirical research was made possible in two municipalities, both of which appear with pseudonyms in this study.

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Rotterdam, October 2007

Part I

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A Cultural Approach

1 Re-Introducing Culture

1.1 To Blame and Renew

Two disasters have influenced the way in which local governments have been perceived in the Netherlands in the new millennium. On New Year's Eve 2001 in Volendam a café burnt down: fourteen young people died, 250 people were injured and many were maimed for life (Commissie onderzoek cafébrand nieuwjaarsnacht 2001 2001; Cachet, et al. 2002). On May 13, 2000, in Enschede a firework factory exploded, taking the lives of 22 people, injuring around 950, and blowing up a whole neighborhood (Commissie Onderzoek Vuurwerkramp 2001). These two disasters have become collective traumas for the people living through them and signs of governmental failure. In addition to these disasters, municipalities such as Den Helder and Delfzijl have recently been confronted with political crises. There is a difference in the significance of Volendam and Enschede on the one hand, and these political crises on the other. Nevertheless, in all cases, what has been referred to as the local *governing culture*[1] (Cachet, et al. 2002) was partly blamed for what had taken place.

In the same period that the disasters and political crises occurred a project to change the structure of Dutch local government was initiated (Staatscommissie Dualisme en lokale democratie 2000) and implemented (March 2002). This project, referred to as *dualization*, was ultimately aimed at revitalizing local democracy and politics. An important assumption of the commission supervising the implementation of dualization was that in the long run the change in structure had to accompany a change in the governing culture in order to reach the desired revitalization. A change in the governing culture was to be at the heart of the project, and it was to ensure that the renewal of municipalities was not to be a mere 'mechanistic-technical and juridical operation' (compare Staatscommissie Dualisme en lokale democratie 2000: 13-14, 344-345; Vernieuwingsimpuls 2003: 17). At the end of the dualization project, the commission supervising the implementation concluded that…

> '[g]overning culture is the real key to improvement [of local government]. We observe that during the past four years, governing culture has maybe been the most important factor for renewing local government. And this is while there is actually only attention to it when things go really wrong […]. It is striking that in many municipalities governing culture is actually no issue. There should be impulses given so that municipalities will give more attention to governing culture, even if there are not (yet) problematic situations' (Begeleidingscommissie 2006b: 13; compare Bovens, et al. 2006: 121).[2]

The research conducted to develop this study began with an interest in the governing culture of Dutch local government. But, the growing public interest in culture when it comes to understanding what happens in government has not been confined to the local level of government. More recently there has been broad interest in the culture of public and political organizations at the level of the nation, and of Dutch societal culture, particularly since the national elections of 2002.[3] In order to understand their loss in the elections, and react to it, the Dutch Labor Party commissioned two advisory reports. One of them recommended that the 'closed governing culture' in the party should be critically reflected upon. The other, which was initiated with the task of identifying what went wrong in the organization and culture of the party, adopted a revealing title about the problem at hand: 'Under a closed roof, no grass can grow'[4] (Werkgroep Organisatie en Politieke Cultuur 2002).

In the 2002 Dutch state of the union[5] the new government stated that the country needed a new governing culture and the government wished to contribute to this (Government 17-09-2002).[6] One practical consequence of this wish was the initiation of debates about the values and norms of Dutch people (WRR 2003).[7] In addition, at the end of 2002 the new minister of Internal Affairs requested the Council for Public Administration to write a report on the organizational culture of the governmental departments (Raad voor het Openbaar Bestuur 2004). This was because the departmental cultures were experienced as 'compartmentalized.'[8] According to the minister of Internal Affairs (quoted in Raad voor het Openbaar Bestuur 2004: 15) '[c]itizens, media, scientists and politicians in responding to various incidents have put forward the need for a cultural revolution or a cultural turn inside the government. Central government cannot ignore this societal and political wish to bring about a cultural change.'[9]

Following from the disasters and crises, such as those which occurred before the initiation of projects to revitalize local government culture, and in much of the political and media discussion about governing culture, the notion of culture was often given a negative connotation. The culture was called 'closed,' 'sick,' 'autistic,' 'parochial' and sometimes even 'corrupt,' to name but a few descriptions. Overall, culture was blamed for problems. This combination of culture and trouble is of course not so strange, since news and other kinds of reports normally focus on what goes wrong. What is interesting, however, is that the obvious solution for solving problems in these kinds of cultures was pulled like a rabbit out of a hat. There was hardly any analysis of the way culture in and around government operates. Ringeling (1985b: 8; cf. van Gunsteren 1994: 184) made a similar statement about administrative culture: 'The vague, complex factor serves as a sort of deus ex machina: the exact way that it works is unclear, but it is surely the cause.'[10] The culture, if defined as a source of problems, has to change and become 'open' or 'transparent,' if not just 'new.'

It becomes apparent that concepts of culture are quite commonly used to point to problems and solutions in the Dutch context of public administration.[11] At the same time politicians and policy makers indicate they need ideas about and descriptions of culture. There are already many ideas and descriptions around, as will become clear in the next section. Nevertheless, although the relevance of culture for understanding the specific terrain of local government was stated before (Derksen 1998: 14; Korsten and Tops 1998: 19-20), it is only recently, and mostly in the context of dualization, that research into the culture of Dutch local government has been conducted more comprehensively (Cachet, et al. 2001; Denters and Pröpper 2002; Bovens, et al. 2006). Before the turn of the century little attention was given to the matter, not even in a volume (van Heffen, et al. 1996) that aimed to explore the issue of (political) culture from the perspective of public administration.

Against the backdrop of developments and assumptions in practice and academia, this study aims at fulfilling the need for more detailed descriptions of culture at the local level. Overall, the aim of this study is to open up (new) ways of looking at governing culture at the local level and to scrutinize empirical images of the Dutch governing culture that are in play. This research does not start from the idea that culture is a phenomenon that is easily understood, let alone measured or managed. It offers a novel and comprehensive approach to analyzing culture in municipalities. At the same time it will argue against approaches to culture that teach us to see culture either as a variable that should be separable from other variables or only in terms of homogeneity and stability. It will show that to understand culture in the complex world of local government, it is useful to look at it as a process of sense making in which actors are constantly engaged. The following chapters start from the assumption that to look at culture in such a way involves getting close to the action that goes on in practice, instead of seeing action and culture as clear-cut variables that we should study separately or seeing culture as a solid force.

But before we get there, this chapter will give a short overview of ideas on culture and the study of culture in Public Administration. The question at the heart of this chapter is: What is culture? From a methodological and epistemological perspective, an additional question of interest is: how can it be researched? An investigation into these questions will be initiated in *Section 1.2*, which reviews culture studies in Public Administration and Dutch Public Administration more specifically. In addition to theoretical and methodological approaches to culture, various empirical images of the Dutch way of governing are reconstructed. *Section 1.3*, the last section of this chapter, demonstrates that different approaches to culture provide conflicting responses to epistemological, ontological and methodological questions regarding culture. A choice between these approaches will be made. An outline will be made of the specific approach that is developed in this study. The research question formulated near the end of the last section will establish the focus for the rest of the study upon *the way actors in Dutch municipalities make sense of the issues they are confronted with, and the images of governing that are used for sense making and how they are used*. The chapter concludes with a brief outline of the study.

1.2 Culture Research in Public Administration

Despite the apparent need for ideas and descriptions, it would be foolish to think that culture is unexplored terrain in Dutch Public Administration,[12] let alone in Public Administration at large. Many researchers in Public Administration have devoted time to culture research. One might even argue that culture research demonstrates the plurality of studies in Public Administration. In order to get a good idea of the way culture has been theorized and researched, and of the empirical images that are available, the work on culture in and around the practice of public administration is reviewed in this section. It will become apparent that relevant studies of culture have been conducted in various, somewhat separated 'domains' of Public Administration and related fields.

First of all, in the study of politics and policy making, a political culture approach and an approach that calls itself Cultural Theory were developed. Secondly, the study of public organizations enlisted and developed approaches to organizational culture. Thirdly, more pragmatic institutional and historical studies in Dutch Public Administration have provided various interesting empirical images of culture in and around the practice of Dutch public administration. Finally, in recent studies of culture in and around Dutch local government, various combinations of the approaches to politics, policy-making and public organizations have been adopted.

Political Culture and Cultural Theory

A first group of culture studies can be identified in the field of politics and policy making. At a time when Dutch Public Administration hardly existed as a separate discipline in the Netherlands, Almond and Verba theorized about and applied the concept of *political culture*.[13] In their *The Civic Culture* (1963), they compared the political culture of five nations. In the Dutch context, political culture became the central interest of Daemen (1983; 1985; 1990). He closely followed Almond and Verba's work. Almond and Verba, and Daemen defined political culture as the pattern of orientations towards political objects that is specific for a certain group or category (Almond and Verba 1963: 14-17; Daemen 1983: 29-31). Orientations included knowledge, beliefs, feelings, judgments and opinions. Among the political objects were the political system as a general object, the 'upward' flow of policy making, the 'downward' flow of policy enforcement, and the individual as a member of the political system.[14]

In accordance with a (neo-)positivist epistemology, political culture was seen as a variable. It was to be set aside from the political structure. Whereas the first (culture) was merely a mental phenomenon, the latter (structure) also included actual behavior. In the work of both Almond and Verba and Daemen, individuals were the carriers of orientations. Culture functioned through psychological processes in the individual (Daemen 1990: 88). These individuals also became the focus of large surveys among members of nations. The nations Almond and Verba selected were the United States, Great Britain, Germany, Italy and Mexico. Daemen did his empirical research in the Netherlands. These researchers sought to identify which kinds of political cultures stimulate the stability of political democracies (Daemen 1990: 65). The large surveys adopted by Almond and Verba allowed comparisons across nations and were new in the 1960s, but consequently became a strong international tradition of political culture research (Johnson 2003: 98).

Throughout the 1980s an alternative approach to political culture developed. It did not adopt a strict separation between mental phenomena on the one hand and structures and actual behavior on the other. This interdisciplinary analytical framework, most often referred to as Cultural Theory, originated in the work of anthropologist Douglas and was further developed through various contributions of policy analyst Wildavsky and others (Thompson and Wildavsky 1986; e.g. Thompson, et al. 1990; for overview see Mamadouh 1997; 1999).[15] As an alternative to conceptualizations of culture by the political culture researchers, Cultural Theory put 'culture in the center of the explanation of social life' (Mamadouh 1999: 395). It was no longer treated as one of the variables. At the same time, culture became more than just 'mental products,' as orientations in the political culture research had been (Thompson, et al. 1990: 1; Wildavsky, et al.

1998: 1). Orientations, here in the sense of shared values and beliefs, were to be seen in combination with the structure that can be found in patterns of social relations. Neither of these have priority. Moreover, they are essential to one another because they work reciprocally, interactively and are mutually reinforcing (Thompson, et al. 1990: 1).

According to Cultural Theory there are four or five viable combinations of orientations and social structures in social life. These combinations are referred to as the *ways of life*. Each way of life is a combination of two dimensions. On the one hand, there is 'the extent to which an individual is incorporated into bounded units' (Thompson, et al. 1990: 5), referred to as the *group* dimension. On the other hand, there is 'the degree to which an individual's life is circumscribed by externally imposed prescriptions' (Thompson, et al. 1990: 5), referred to as the *grid* dimension. The combination of high or low scores on either dimension results in a typology of four ways of life. To begin with, actors in the strong groups with minimal prescriptions are part of a way of life that is *egalitarian*. When the social environment consists of strong boundaries and binding prescriptions, the resulting way of life is *hierarchical*. In the absence of strong groups and prescriptions, the *individualistic* way of life can be found. The fourth way of life, called *fatalistic*, is found when actors are bound by prescriptions but hardly incorporated into groups.[16]

In addition to the idea that orientations and structure should not be thought of separately in the study of culture, Cultural Theory differed from political culture research in its emphasis on the plurality of culture within one context, and the socially constructed nature of reality.[17] Plurality in one context stems from the various ways of life that are always – at least potentially - present (Douglas 1992: 411). According to the stronger version of the theory (Thompson, et al. 1990; Mamadouh 1999: 397), which gives it a normative character, the various ways of life even need each other to be viable. Each way of life has its blind spots. They all need other ways of life to compensate for their inherent flaws. Social construction resides in the four different manners in which reality is perceived from the different ways of life. The ways of life equal specific ways of looking at the world. Moreover, the ways of life need each other to be able to define themselves. Thompson, et al. (1990: 216-217) also used the idea of social construction to point to the way in which the idea of the political sphere itself comes into being through the negotiation between adherents of various ways of life. They argued that as '[…] competing definitions of the "political" attest, the boundary between political and nonpolitical is not graven in stone, or inherent in the nature of things. Definitions of what is political are themselves politically biased. When one person accuses another of "politicizing" a subject, the disagreement is about how far the governmental writ should run. Constructing the boundary between political and nonpolitical is thus part of the struggle between competing ways of life' (Thompson, et al. 1990: 216).

The application of Cultural Theory has been diverse. Some have used Cultural Theory to test hypotheses that can be generated with it, while others have seen the theory more as a rough classification scheme or an interpretive device (Mamadouh 1999: 396).[18] The use of it in (Dutch) Public Administration is much more of the second type (e.g. Hoppe and Peterse 1993; van Gunsteren 1994: 145-154; Hoppe 2001; Engbersen 2006[1990]: 148-228).[19] In his book on traffic policies in the period after the Second World War, Hendriks (1996) used Cultural Theory to develop what he called a cultural–institutional approach. Hendriks' application could be typified more specifically as an interpretive, comparative case study. His work focused on car traffic policy in the cities of Birmingham and Munich over long periods and consisted of interviews and the analysis of documents. Interested in a particular policy issue, Hendriks introduced a specific alternative to political culture: *policy culture* (Hendriks 1996: 48). Policy culture, as a phenomenon more specific than political culture and more general than organizational culture (discussed next), was defined as 'the values, norms and rules that policy actors and communities have and use when it comes to the content of policy issues' (Hendriks 1996: 92).[20] At another point in his book Hendriks stressed that when it comes to policy culture, it is important to identify the durable patterns of preferences and aspirations on the one hand, and the accompanying patterns of action on the other hand (Hendriks 1996: 51). In accordance with Cultural Theory, Hendriks (1996: 49-50) stated that there is no reason to make a strict separation between preferences and aspirations on the one hand and patterns of action on the other hand since policy making is always matter of thinking and action. Hendriks' focus was on the specific social structures of administrative institutions. These institutions referred to the 'social guiding mechanisms that are typical for the administrative system in which policy actors and communities are embedded' (Hendriks 1996: 92). According to Hendriks, orientations are strongly connected to these institutions since institutions are infused with orientations.[21]

To summarize, research on political culture provided a theoretical framework that took culture to be a mental phenomenon consisting of orientations that separated culture from other variables like structure. The focus of the empirical research was the level of nations while individuals were considered to carry the orientations. Cultural Theory proposes a more integral approach to culture that emphasized a strong relationship between orientations and social-institutional structures, thinking and action. Cultural Theory also offers the idea of four different ways of life that correspond to different conceptions of reality. It also used the idea of the social construction of reality. Finally, Hendriks put forward the idea of a policy culture.

Organizational Culture

A second group of studies investigated culture in public organizations. The rediscovery of culture in studies of organization at the beginning of the 1980s had led to a very large variety of approaches to *organizational culture* (for overviews see Smircich 1983a; Yanow and Adams 1998; Parker 2000; Martin 2002). These approaches have inspired studies of public organizations since the second half of the 1980s. In Dutch Public Administration Frissen (1986; 1989) and Veenswijk (1995) explored the organizational culture of bureaucracies and governmental departments, respectively. Frissen (compare Smircich 1983a; 1989) constructed four distinctive approaches to organizational culture, which offer an interesting way to show the different ways of theorizing about organizational culture. The first approach took organizational culture to be a contingency factor, which is to say that the culture of an organization depends on the cultural characteristics of the environment that surrounds it. Societal culture operates as an independent variable, influencing an organization through the members of an organization (Smircich 1983a: 343). Almond and Verba (1963) can be seen as contributors to this approach, but they did not apply it to the level of bureaucratic organizations

(Frissen 1989: 53). The Dutch researcher Hofstede created a sophisticated approach to the study of national cultures that makes it possible to compared them on five dimensions (Hofstede 1994[1991]: 13-15). Although, strictly speaking, it was not developed for the analysis of organizational culture, Hofstede's work (e.g. 1994[1991]) attributes to the contingency approach to organizational culture. The second way of perceiving organizational culture is as a subsystem of an organization (Smircich 1983a: 345). Other subsystems would be, for instance, technology or structure. Although all subsystems are connected, they can be described separately. Organizational culture is seen as a domain of values, leadership, rituals and informal communication; it is a subsystem that has a regulating function on the other subsystems upon which an organization is built. The idea of developing a 'strong culture' that can benefit the organization has been the focus of much attention in this approach. It considers the instrumental functions of organizational culture, and conceives of it as a variable that can be managed. A third approach to organizational culture conceives of it as an aspect of the system. That is, every subsystem of an organization has a cultural dimension to it. The structure of an organization, for instance, is value-loaded. In this approach organizational culture is pluralistic. Subcultures can be present in an organization. Culture cannot be seen as independent from politics, and thereby power relations.

A final way of looking at organizational culture, which is central in Frissens' book, perceives the organization itself as a cultural phenomenon. This could be called an interpretive approach.[22] This last approach was inspired by the work of Smirchic (1983b; 1983a; compare Morgan 1997[1986]: 119-152). She distinguished and elaborated on a view of culture-as-a-metaphor for organizations. In this approach organizations do not *have* cultures. They *are* cultures (Smircich 1983a: 347). Although not much different from the third view of organizational culture, in Frissen's overview of approaches to culture this one stands out the most. It gives culture a central and determining role in organizations. Organizations are cultural phenomena.[23] Analysis of organizational culture turns into a cultural analysis of organizations. Consistent with this view Frissen took organizational culture to be 'the totality of patterns of sense making in and around organizations' (Frissen 1989: 123). The difference between the aspect approach and the cultural approach is small. Both the third and the fourth approaches to organizational culture correspond to ideas of culture in Cultural Theory (Frissen 1989: 60-61; Hendriks 1996: 50-51).[24] As with the aspect approach, Cultural Theory stressed the pluralistic character of culture in one social context. Just as with the interpretive approach, Cultural Theory put culture at the center of an understanding of social life. In accordance to both approaches, Cultural Theory emphasized the cultural character of structures.

In order to conduct an empirical study that combined a search for culture together with 'informatization' in a bureaucratic organization, Frissen made use of all four views. The interpretive approach, however, became the overarching perspective. According to Frissen, 'ethnographic' methods were the most desirable for an empirical study of organizational culture as sense making. He used a prolonged stay in the organization in order to observe 'daily affairs in a context that is as "natural" as possible' (Frissen 1989: 127). This was to enable him to describe the culture from the perspective of its members (Frissen 1989: 129). This way of doing research, originating from anthropology and sociology, was quite uncommon in Dutch Public Administration, and it still is.

Veenswijk (1995), the second Dutch Public Administration researcher studying organizational culture intensively, argued that Frissen should not have used all four approaches in his research. He said that this gave the impression that these different approaches merely complemented one another. Veenswijk recognized that not only are there ontological differences, as well as fuzzy borders between the views on culture, but also the views are not in balance because they do not give the same importance to culture in organizations.[25] Nevertheless, Veenswijk followed Frissen in his footsteps, further developing and adjusting an interpretive approach. In Veenswijk's work organizational culture is about meaning and sense making. He saw the interpretive approach to culture as a move away from using it in the instrumental way that had assisted the revival of organizational culture at the beginning of the 1980s (compare Parker 2000). As in Frissen's second approach, treating culture as a subsystem, the instrumental approach has seen culture primarily as 'another critical lever or key by which strategic managers can influence and direct the course of their organizations' (Smircich 1983a: 346). According to Veenswijk aiming to change the behavior of the members of an organization cannot be central if meaning is the focus of research (Veenswijk 1995: 14, 43-47).

The new theoretical notions of organizational culture that Veenswijk applied in his study of culture in Dutch Public Administration are mostly those of Schein (see also Schein 1991; 1997[1985]).[26] In Schein's view organizational culture consists of various interacting levels (Veenswijk 1995: 60-68; Schein 1997[1985]: 16-27).[27] The first level is the one of artifacts 'which includes everything one sees, hears, and feels when one encounters a new group with an unfamiliar culture' (Schein 1997[1985]: 17). These artifacts are hard to decipher, because it is not possible to 'read' their meaning directly without knowledge of the culture as it can be found at other levels. The second level of culture includes espoused values, or rather ideas of 'what ought to be,' including strategies, goals and philosophies that are publicly used to justify behavior. Depending on the possible existence of incongruence between the values that are espoused and the actual behavior that is displayed, espoused values may or may not be the reflection of the deepest level of culture: that of basic assumptions. Basic assumptions are often tacit and implicit meanings (understandings) of the world. The members of an organization share them. In Schein's work, this is what culture is all about in the end. Culture is nothing more or nothing less than an integrated set of basic assumptions that define for the members of an organization 'what to pay attention to, what things mean, how to react emotionally to what is going on, and what actions to take in various kinds of situations' (Schein 1997[1985]: 22). This made Veenswijk, just like Hendriks (1996: 50) in Cultural Theory, stress that the ultimate interest of the culture researcher is not at the level of action but at a deeper level (Veenswijk 1995: 43).

Although Veenswijk used Schein's ideas when it came to organizational culture, he also added the possibility of cultural differentiation in a public organization. The idea of different cultures within one context had already been part of Frissen's third approach to organizational culture and in the ideas in Cultural Theory.[28] Within these different cultures, or subcultures, it might be possible that 'alternative definitions of reality might be developed that might even be in competition with each other' (Veenswijk 1995: 68). Veenswijk's approach also stresses the idea that actors might be constantly part of multiple cultures. Actors, ‘in the midst of a complex of cultural constellations,’ (Veenswijk 1995: 68) will constantly recognize themselves as part of more than one culture and will be able to connect these. In this way, although very cautiously, Veenswijk distanced himself from Schein’s idea that culture is necessarily about sharing basic assumptions. In the empirical part of his research, Veenswijk used various research methods for gathering data, but relied primarily upon doing interviews. Veenswijk’s focus on the essences of governmental departments led him to focus not on the use of culture in action, but on finding the cultural characteristics of the departments and units. The resulting descriptions of the cultures were partly historical, focusing on the two governmental departments in general, and partly organizational, focusing on a unit within these two governmental departments.

In his final analysis, Veenswijk (1995: 239-256) stated that three theoretical images could capture the idea of the organizational culture of departmental units. The culture of departments can be described as an iron cage formed from basic assumptions developed over time, as a source of fragmentation, and as a political instrument in the hands of political leaders. These images evoke several well-known publications in the literature on organizational culture (Meyerson and Martin 1987; Frost, et al. 1991; Martin 1992; 2002). Meyerson and Martin (1987) argue that organizational culture had been (and can simultaneously be) studied from three perspectives. According to the first of these, the *integration perspective*, culture is consistent and shared among members of an organization. The *differentiation perspective* allows for inconsistencies, but starts from the idea of consensus within subcultures. This perspective has an obvious parallel with Cultural Theory. Finally, the *fragmentation perspective* focuses on ambiguity and argues that both consensus and disagreement can only be found in separate issues since meanings are constantly fluctuating. In a recent contribution to the Dutch debate on culture in and around government, Noordergraaf, Veenswijk and Vermeulen (2004) have pointed at the relevance of Martin’s three perspectives. The authors argue that the approach to organizational culture that sees it as a homogeneous entity, as Schein (1991) did, should not prevail.[29]

To summarize, in research on organizational culture, categorizations of various approaches have been made. The further development of the interpretive approach in the work of Frissen and Veenswijk elaborated on the idea of culture as patterns of meaning and sense making. Frissen also introduced the intensive use of ethnography, which he used to look at culture from the perspective of actors in organizations. Veenswijk introduced Schein’s idea of layers of culture and basic assumptions as the essence of culture. Schein’s idea that these basic assumptions would be shared throughout an organization was criticized, because the meaning of issues in organizations could be both contested and ambiguous.

Images of the Dutch Ways of Governing

A third group of studies of culture can be distinguished not so much because of their development of theoretical or methodological approaches, but because of the strong empirical images they generated about the Dutch governing culture or decision-making culture. These studies have been more pragmatic when it comes to conceptualizing culture. They could be called institutional and political-historical in orientation and focused on the national level.

In the first place the work by Lijphart (1975[1968]) is of importance. In the 1960s he used political culture concepts in his study of politics in the Netherlands from 1917 to 1967. This work was later extended to 1975.[30] Besides the more general contribution he made to the empirical discussion on political culture and democracy, he created strong images of the way the political elite made policy under conditions of the minimal consensus. These conditions typified the social-political context of the Netherlands. The Netherlands had been a country in which several societal pillars – catholic, protestant, liberal and socialist – had been formed. These pillars, with their own institutions and political elites, had been subcultures within the Dutch culture. Lijphart (1975[1968]: 122-138) formulated seven 'rules of the game' that could help to understand the typical Dutch 'politics of accommodation' that political elites used to deal with issues at the national level. These rules of the game consisted of a 'mixture of procedural rules and general orientations towards politics' (Lijphart 1975[1968]: 122-123).

Paradoxically, the first and most important rule of the game was that politics is a serious business, not a game at all. The second rule was that ideological differences in society were taken as basic realities that cannot and should not be changed. The elite agreed to disagree. The third rule was that the elite governed. The most important issues were dealt with at summit conferences. The fourth rule was the rule of proportionality. This meant that every party or institute would get the share of what there is to divide according to the amount of votes or members it represented. This rule was used to deal with scarce resources. The fifth rule, offering a hand to the fourth one, was to depoliticize sensitive issues (compare Daalder 1995: 28-31). This required the art of representing emotionally sensitive political issues in a non-political way, offering the possibility to deal with such issues according to objective principles of economy, calculation or especially law. A sixth rule was that the process of negotiations between members of the elite was kept secret. In order to promote the successful settlement of issues, the public should not be able to monitor the moves of the elite. The final elite rule that Lijphart identified was that the Cabinet had the right to govern. This implied that the political parties and parliament would allow the Cabinet a fair degree of autonomy and would not criticize it up until the point where it would be impossible to govern the country.

The rules that Lijphart formulated in the 1960s had already changed by the next decade, when polarization had started and many issues were politicized. This was observed by the Dutch political scientists Daalder (1995: 40-72) and Lijphart (1975[1968]: 196-219). The societal pillars had started to crumble. This 'depillarization' had resulted in a situation in which the political and religious elites could no longer count upon the authority they used to have. Pluralism was now valued and equal access for all interested groups to agenda setting and decision-making was demanded. As Kickert (2003: 123) has noted, '[f]ierce political fighting between clear standpoints replaced the eternal deliberation and compromises'. The rule of secrecy had been turned into a demand for openness (Daalder 1995: 48), although this did not lead to transparency right away. Elements of the pluralism that raised its head in the nineteen-seventies became part of daily life (Kickert 2003: 123). In his analysis of the first part of the 1980s, Daalder (1995: 73-100) argued that some aspects of the rules that were dominant two decades before had been revived, but in a different mode.

Whereas the business-like elite politics of the period before 1967 had been legitimized through the strong ties that the leaders had with segments of society, this societal support for these kinds of compromises had diminished. Governing as a (serious) business would now have to take the form of a no-nonsense government policy. As a remedy to what some saw as slow decision making, another way of doing had already presented itself: praising decisiveness. Daalder (1995: 99) called this 'technocratic toughness.' Of importance now were the three E's of economy, efficiency and effectiveness. The political ideology of the 1970s had been replaced by (a return of) pragmatism (Kickert 2003).

From mixed perspectives (political, administrative, historical) that resonated both Lijphart's earlier studies and Daalder's comments, accounts of governing in the Netherlands were presented in an edited volume (Hendriks and Toonen 1998b; 2001). Both the concepts of *governing culture* and *decision-making culture* were employed in that work.[31] Culture seemed more or less equal to concepts like *institution* (both formal and informal) and *tradition*. Interest in the Dutch system was united with empirical observations of the Dutch way of 'doing' decision-making. Hosting a variety of essays, not all employing a culture concept, the volume focused on 'the state of the Dutch state' (Hendriks and Toonen 1998a: 1). As such, the book reflected on the debate on the merits of the Dutch 'viscous' (in the sense of sticky, hard to move) state. The political decision making in the Netherlands was described as a consensus culture combined with a culture of meetings – this has also been typified as a tradition of 'accommodation and compromise.'[32] What this boils down to is a constant quest for consensus, leading to a slow decision-making process in which many actors have to be consulted in order to come to a compromise. This was also summarized as the combination of three C's: *consultation*, *compromise* and *consensus*. The volume argues that two views of the matter had been formed (Hendriks 1998; Hendriks and Toonen 1998a). Some had criticized the 'viscous' way of doing for its inability to come to decisions in time. This was because of the need for consensus in a complex decision-making structure in which everything is tied to everything else. This kind of critique, as seen above, had also become part of other ways of doing in the 1970s and 1980s. A rival view, although according to the editors of the volume still less developed, looked at the same way of doing in a positive way, calling it 'polder politics.' What is interesting is that these empirical images of governing are also part of debates in practice concerning the right way to govern. This shows how much they are not just images of what is going on in Dutch governing, but also normative images of what should be going on.

Taking up the concept of governing culture from a present-day perspective, Schouw and Tops (1998: 13-16) looked for it in 'the attitude and behavior' of those who govern in the Netherlands. According to them there are six features that are of importance and reflect the type of governing culture that the Netherlands has had for a long time. First of all, there is a sense of paternalism. Those who govern know best. They will take care of the public interest better than anyone else. A second feature is the uncomfortable attitude towards 'the voice of the people.' Direct influence of the people on policy is not stimulated. Third, Dutch administrators govern *together*, making use of units in which actors are more or less equal. A fourth feature is openness to mostly pragmatic renewal. Fifth, administrators are sensitive to criticism. Together, this culture has grown in which ‘conflicts and risks are avoided, but that [the culture] is at the same time relaxed and pluriform’ (Schouw and Tops 1998: 15).

To summarize, the more pragmatic approaches to culture surrounding government at the national level have provided images that conflict, to a certain extent. Lijphart’s more pragmatic approach generated the idea of seven rules that would have been characteristic of the Dutch elite decision making before 1967. This culture was also typified as a combination of consultation, compromise and consensus at the top. After 1967 changes occurred in the Dutch way of governing, bringing about greater polarization in the 1970s, followed by a culture of decisiveness in the 1980s. Nevertheless, the image of Dutch governing culture as a *quest for consensus* (the three C’s) seems to remain dominant. Next to empirical images, these images have been part of a debate about the right way to govern. Schouw and Tops added six features of those who govern in the Dutch context.

Culture in Dutch Local Government

A final group of studies consists of those that have taken up culture in combination with local government. Here, we find theoretical and methodological applications on the one hand, and empirical images on the other. Even before Dutch Public Administration became a discipline, a researcher who can be seen as its founder adopted an anthropological concept of culture. According to Van Poelje (1936), culture was ‘the artificial environment, which man has formed in the course of centuries, that enlarges his abilities beyond the boundaries of his physical powers, unites individuals in enduring groups and gives them a solid organization’ (Van Poelje 1936: 5). Van Poelje paid attention to *culture politics*, defined as all acts governments performed for the purpose of improving ‘the mental and physical standard of living of the population’ (Van Poelje 1936: 5). He observed that this was a task of growing importance to Dutch local government. This concept of culture was, on the one hand, focused on the whole community like Almond and Verba, but on the other hand more inclusive than the concepts of culture discussed here.

Turning to more recent studies of local government, it is possible to see more attention being given to culture. To one extent introductions to local government (Korsten and Tops 1998: 18-21; Derksen and Schaap 2004: 13-16) have acknowledged the importance of cultural factors for understanding differences between municipalities.[33] Political and governing culture, seen as images of ‘how the municipality should be governed, how relations with local society should be, what the role is of local government and civil society and the citizens,’ are identified as the main reason why local governments themselves are different (Derksen and Schaap 2004: 14-15).[34]

To another extent, some single essays have taken culture as their focus (Derksen 1990; e.g. Aalders and Montfort 1998; Tops 2000), and there has been attention to culture in research that was primarily concerned with other phenomena (Derksen, et al. 1987; Schouw 1996; Schouw and Tops 1998; Tops and Zouridis 2002). Furthermore, one book in the practice literature reported on a change project in the municipality of Groningen (Pauka and Zunderdorp 1988)[35]. Derksen (1990) wrote about culture and conflict in local government, focusing on the notion of *institutional norms*. Using various cases in Dutch local government, he sketched a rough analytical framework and a program for future research. Derksen's most important points were that both society and the psychology of actors were to be taken into account in the cultural study of local government. Individual actors played important roles in conflicts, which were often the result of a lack of consensus about institutional norms. This lack of consensus, a rather rare phenomenon as such, in its turn would be the result of changes in the culture of society at large. In addition, a study of political crises would enable good insight into the cultural developments of local government.

A combination of some theory and empirical observations can be found in a short essay by Tops (2000). In the context of preparations for a new structure of local government that would soon after be called dualization (see *Section 1.1*), Tops (2000) stated that the fundamental question, when it comes to the change of structure, involves the choice for a specific kind of culture.[36] The choice that should be made is between a leadership culture and a consensus culture. In a leadership culture the recognition of leaders and their ability to act[37] - that is, their decisiveness - are important. Alternatively, a consensus culture is based on the three C's (mentioned earlier) that would be typical of the Dutch state and way of doing: consultation, compromise and consensus. Using earlier studies, Tops and a colleague wrote about governing culture in a book on the styles of governing that members of the board of mayor and aldermen had adopted (Schouw and Tops 1998: 7-25; compare Tops and Zouridis 2002: 18-19). The observation was made that the Dutch governing culture could be typified as a consensus culture, leaving little space for strong leaders. From these observations it is possible to expect that actors in favor of a no-nonsense policy to counter a lack of decisiveness – a trend Daalder described in the 1980s – would be challenged by a culture that sees governing as something 'collegial and collective' (Schouw and Tops 1998: 8).

Overall, despite these interesting contributions, there has not, until recently, been many researchers focused upon culture municipalities. The more substantial interest in culture in municipalities has been the result of the Volendam disaster (Cachet, et al. 2001; Cachet, et al. 2002) and dualization - the project meant to revitalize local democracy and politics (Denters and Pröpper 2002; Bovens, et al. 2006). Three practice-related studies have theorized *governing culture*, although in a different way. At the beginning of the dualization project Denters and Pröpper (2002) developed a model for the changes that would take place with the implementation of dualization in municipalities. Governing culture was an important part of this model. Consistent with the approach introduced by Almond and Verba, culture was separated from formal structure and actual practice. Governing culture in the research referred to orientations towards the roles of the council and board of mayor and aldermen, on the one hand, and their ensemble (Denters and Pröpper 2002: 10) on the other,. The researchers relied primarily upon surveys conducted in various municipalities at two points in time. They focused upon actors in the - narrowly defined - political system: aldermen, council members, mayor, civil servants; opinion leaders were selected in the first round of research, and only council members in the second round.[38]

In their research on the Volendam disaster Cachet at al. (2001; 2002) also stayed close to the legacy of Almond and Verba. Not only did they talk about the 'psychological layer' of local government, they also used the notion of orientations, including 'opinions, values, norms, perceptions, affections towards and evaluations of public administration, mostly in and around Volendam' (Cachet, et al. 2001: 11). Of importance is that, in contrast to Denters and Pröpper, they thought governing culture should be something that concerns more than the actors formally belonging to the political system in a narrow sense. They defined governing culture as 'the sum of opinions on steering the collective sector, *as expressed by the members of a community (administrators, representatives, civil society and citizens)*' (Cachet, et al. 2002: 392, italics added).[39] In other words, the definition of governing culture of a local government differs not in the definition of 'culture,' but in the definition of 'governing.'

Finally, and most recently, researchers evaluating governing culture and governing capacity at the end of the dualization project employed what they called an interpretive notion of governing culture (Bovens, et al. 2006). Although they followed Cachet et al. with their inclusion of those not being part of local government in a narrow sense (i.e., as the formal political organization), their approach would appear to be inspired by concepts of organizational culture.[40] For Bovens et al. governing culture could be characterized as 'ways of doing and acting shared by administrators [those governing] and administrative parties and partners' (Bovens, et al. 2006: 18).[41]

Governing culture was operationalized with the help of three layers: 'governing traditions,' 'governing styles' and 'governing habits' (Bovens, et al. 2006: 18). Governing traditions refers to the 'cultural genes' of a city or a city community that have slowly developed over time. These are colored by circumstances, developments and historical experiences and it is hard for actors involved in governing to escape them. Governing styles refers to ways of dealing with issues and is influenced by ideas of what is normal and useful. Governing habits, finally, are concrete methods of doing work, colored by actors, instruments and objects. The layered model present in Schein's work could be seen in this conceptualization of culture. Bovens et al. studied the governing culture and governing capacity of four Dutch municipalities in the light of the dualization change. In their conclusion Bovens et al. (2006: 106-107) argued that the local governing culture of a municipality is important, because it helps to establish what dualization means locally – in a certain municipality - and how it should be turned into action. The commission concluded that dualization seems to have been integrated into the existing traditions and habits in municipalities. Rather than changing the governing culture, this culture had itself been used to interpret dualization.

To summarize, the studies analyzing culture in Dutch local government began early on with an inclusive, anthropological definition of culture. A long time later Derksen argued for attention to sociological and psychological factors. Tops and Schouw painted local government in the Netherlands in terms of a culture of three C's - consultation, compromise and consensus – which leaves little space for a leadership culture. The interest in culture in Dutch local government has really only accelerated in recent years. Two more elaborate studies conceptualized culture drawing from the ideas developed within the political culture field, while a third study adopted a more interpretative approach. Two of the three approaches also extended their focus upon culture beyond the boundaries of local government in its narrow sense.

1.3 Beyond Current Approaches towards a Research Question

The studies reviewed in the previous section show a wide variety of approaches to culture in and around the practice of public administration. They also identify various empirical images of the Dutch governing culture. The differences in approaches to culture have to be dealt with before we can go on. Differences in approaches can be found within the separate study domains of politics and policy-making, organization or local government. To accentuate and understand the conflicts between existing approaches to culture two related questions are useful. First, it can be asked whether culture should be seen as an essence or as a process (cf. Wright 1994). The first option strongly connects to a view of reality as a thing 'out there,' while the second is consistent with a social constructivist view of reality. Some current approaches tend to choose a position between these two. Secondly, we can ask whether culture should be taken as a variable or as a metaphor (cf. Smircich 1983a). The first option would lead to a more (neo-)positivistic approach to research, while the second would lead to an interpretive approach. My main intent here is to position my own approach in the field of culture research at large, with the help of these two crucial questions. I do not to seek to fit all the approaches reviewed in the previous section into the categories that the answers to these questions create. The approach that will be developed in the second half of this section can be described as an *interpretive process approach*. In this section it will also be suggested that the empirical images of governing, found mostly at the national level, can be further developed into constructs that actors in municipalities use when they 'make sense.'

Essence or Process?

A separation can be made between those who refer to culture as an essence belonging to an entity and those who treat it more like a process of sense making (compare Czarniawska-Joerges 1991; Wright 1994; Wedeen 2002).[42] Between these two extremes, approaches can be found that start from the idea of conflicting subcultures.

If culture is treated like an essence, it is referred to as a consistent set of values and norms, basic assumptions, a tradition or a system of meanings or beliefs. Culture is seen as something that is shared, internally consistent and stable. Culture in this definition can also be said to have layers and a core (Schein 1997[1985]). If this set itself is not regarded as a thing, then at least it is tightly coupled to an entity that is supposed to have stable characteristics, be it a group, an organization, nation or municipality. Culture has an essence of its own; apart from the way actors use its elements. Culture in this approach is an inescapable *force*, which makes actors behave in certain ways. Coupled to this 'thing-ness' are longer timelines, since culture is not expected to change overnight. In addition, the members of a group, organization, nation or municipality share culture equally. Although authors using this kind of definition would probably argue that culture is not a *visible* thing, the definition clearly offers the possibility of talking about *the* culture of an entity like an organization, municipality or nation. The ultimate aim of the research might then be to say something about the kind of culture that is found, listing for instance its attributes. Schein's work (1991; Veenswijk 1995; 1997[1985]) in organizational sciences is the clearest representative of this category.[43] Veenswijk's (1995) use of Schein made him also focus mainly on orientations towards the organizational entities. Although the conceptualization used by Bovens et al. (2006a) does not fall entirely under this heading, its layered concept of governing culture with 'cultural genes' at its core belongs here. As Thompson et al. (1990: 216-217) rightly noticed, with its focus on political objects, political culture research reified their object of study. Referring to culture approaches in political sciences, Wedeen (see also Czarniawska-Joerges 1992b: 54-56; 2002) has said that this kind of approach is the result of the reliance upon the definition of culture typical in Geertz's (e.g. 1993[1973]) work.[44]

In a second, subculture approach, culture as an essence is redefined. Although culture might still be regarded as shared and stable over time, it loses its strict location in, or coupling to, a clear entity. Different ways of giving meaning to the social world are always available in one context (Thompson, et al. 1990). Conflict over meaning and negotiation of meaning becomes the central focus of investigation. Importantly, subcultures can be found in *parts* of entities, and actors involved in the fight over meaning can be found beyond formally recognized entities (compare Meyerson and Martin 1987; Hendriks 1996: 48-51). For the study of culture in local government, this view of culture has important consequences. It means that those actors having an active role in governing a town, but who do not belong to its formal organization, can now also be seen as carriers of culture (see also Cachet, et al. 2001; Bovens, et al. 2006). Some of this subculture approach can be found in the work of Veenswijk (1995), who went beyond Schein with his plea for an approach to culture that allows for diversity.[45] Cultural Theory (Thompson, et al. 1990) and Hendriks' views (1996) also fall into this category.

In this research a process view of culture has been adopted (Rosaldo 1989: 91-108; Wright 1994: 61-63; Fay 1996: 50-68).[46] This involves taking one step beyond the approaches reviewed in public administration in general, and local government in particular.[47] It is in accordance with a social constructivist account of reality. If culture is referred to as a process, the interest is less in finding *the* (sub)culture or describing it in its totality. Culture becomes most of all a part of practical situations and the researcher is after understanding social action rather than a system of meanings as such (Czarniawska-Joerges 1992b: 54). The focus is put on the way actors make sense of the issues they are confronted with. As in the subculture view, the negotiation of meaning is important. Meaning cannot be fixed in advance. If ambiguity of all sorts of issues is possible in a culture, it can no longer be expected that actors shared the same image of those issues, even those – or especially those - that are the most important to them. Consequently, the meanings actors give to issues are no longer seen as given from a permanently fixed standpoint. Actors give various, probably conflicting or ambiguous meanings to what they are confronted with in practice. Actors might make pragmatic use of elements of culture they are familiar with or introduce new ones. The idea of stable groups as a necessity for culture is criticized as well. Just as political coalitions might change from issue to issue, so can, for instance, relations between departments in a local bureaucracy or between members of a board. That does not mean they stop their joint sense making. At some point in time, certain groups of actors might be formed in the defense of looking at an issue in a certain way, while at other times other groups might be formed. Moreover, the act of governing itself is defined over and over again.

So, making sense of concrete issues simultaneously involves making sense of governing.

Although Cultural Theory researchers also call their approach a social constructivist approach (Thompson, et al. 1990) and do not want to separate culture from action (joining them in ways of life) the rather solid and static ways of life fit uneasily with a process approach to culture. Holding on to the idea of four universal belief systems 'out there,' to a certain extent predetermines *all* social life with a rigid matrix that denies the historical character and the constant possibility of ambiguity (cf. Hajer's critique on Sabatier in Hajer 1995: 71). The problem with approaches like that is that 'nothing can be said or done with meaning if it does not fit into an *a priori* system, the "authentic" culture which defines the essential social being of the people concerned' (Asad in Wright 1994: 21, italics in original). Even as a heuristic device, it predetermines culture to a limited set of possible meanings that are supposed to be universal. Treating the ways of life as social constructs themselves does not seem to be the most important part of the approach. Despite the idea of a policy culture, directed more at processes than at things, this criticism also holds for Hendriks' (1996) research. Although Frissen's (1989) final conceptualization of culture was consistent with this process approach, he did not combine this with a clear theory of action.

In the organizational sciences this process approach to culture has been outlined more often (e.g. Czarniawska-Joerges 1992b; Wright 1994). The focus on concrete interaction has led various authors in the organizational sciences and sociology to trade the concept of culture for that of stories (compare Czarniawska-Joerges 1992b; Czarniawska 1998), practice (compare Swidler 1986; compare Orr 1990; Orr 1996; Swidler 2001) and performance (compare Alexander 2003; 2004a). In organizational studies, Smirchic and Calás (Calás and Smircich 1987; Smircich and Calás 1987) argued, already in the 1980s, that organizational culture as a concept could be dropped in favor of a 'postmodernism of resistance,' focusing on representation (e.g. Anonymous Authors 1991). Under the name 'sense making' a process approach is central in the work of Weick (1995).

Variable or Metaphor?

Among the various approaches to culture a distinction can also be made between variable and metaphorical approaches.[48] This distinction is analogous to the distinction Smirchic (1983a) made. According to the variable approaches, that reflect a (neo-)positivist epistemology, culture is one of various variables relevant in social life. Whether treated like an independent or a dependent variable, culture can always be seen as separable from other variables. In political sciences the most known work treating culture as an independent variable is the political culture research (Almond and Verba 1963; Daemen 1983). Culture in these studies is located 'in the heads' of individuals, which makes it possible to study it independent of actual practice. Moreover, culture is treated as measurable with statistical techniques and presentable in numeric scores. The lack of measurability of culture is a major concern for those thinking in terms of variables, even if they do not necessarily intend to use quantitative methods (e.g. Klok, et al. 1996: 238). Denters and Pröpper's (2002) research of local government can be located under this approach. The definition of culture in use in the Volendam research (Cachet, et al. 2001; 2002) is also of this kind. Research methods in use are, for the most part, survey and statistics.[49] This kind of work might be using an explicit comparative design. The first and second approach to organizational culture Frissen (1989) identified, treating culture as a contingency factor or a subsystem within an organization, and the instrumental approach Veenswijk (1995) pointed to, also fall into the category of variable approaches. The difference between studies of politics and of organizations seems to be that, in some of the organization culture studies, the possibility to change culture is an important goal, whereas studies like those of the political culture research did not have this instrumental intent.[50]

In this study the choice has been made to use a metaphor or interpretive approach to culture.[51] Putting culture at the center of social life, or at least seeing it as an aspect integral to all parts of social life, culture in this approach becomes more a metaphor for the subject under study (Smircich 1983a; 1983b; compare Morgan 1997[1986]). Although treating culture as mental products offers the possibility to investigate culture with the use of surveys (Johnson 2003: 97), interpretive researchers would argue that a variable approach makes it very hard to see how culture is part of the everyday life that actors in an organization, nation, or municipality experience together. What makes an interpretive approach different from a variable or (neo-)positivist approach is that culture is not strictly separated from other variables. The 'stuff' that makes up culture, whether it is values, beliefs, norms, preferences or something else, is expected to have infused what (neo-)positivists treat as separable subsystems. An example is structure. Since political and organizational structures have cultural meaning, they belong to the realm of culture, or should at least not be seen as having a one-way causal relationship. The methods in use will be qualitative ones like observation, interview and textual analysis.

Authors using an interpretive approach recognize the need to make *meaning* central to the study of culture (Thompson, et al. 1990: xiii; Geertz 1993[1973]: 3-30). Researchers using this approach often invoke the famous words of the anthropologist Geertz, arguing an interpretive approach is 'not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning' (Geertz 1993[1973]: 5). This centrality of meaning does not decide the forms of meaning in practice in advance, or whether it is a contextually shared *system* of significance, a large *toolbox* with all sorts of meaningful images or something in between. The researcher most of all tries to reconstruct the meanings that the actors being studied are using. Talking about the interpretive use of the organizational culture concept, Yanow (1996: 224) said that '[t]hose working from interpretive assumptions […] have used the concept to mean ways in which people make or find life meaningful, communicate meanings to themselves and others, and express themselves in the world.' This also unites interpretive studies of culture with other interpretive studies in public administration (see Yanow 2000; Bevir, et al. 2003; recent contributions include Bevir and Rhodes 2004; Ospina and Dodge 2005). Interpretive approaches study organizations, municipalities, etc., but also policies and their implementation, as meaning*ful* phenomena that can be interpreted. Cultural Theory (Thompson, et al. 1990) and Hendriks' approach (1996) can be called interpretive. In the organizational sciences this approach is known from (among others) the work of Smircich (1983b) and has found elaborations and adaptations in the work of Frissen (1989) and Veenswijk (1995). When it comes to studying the local level, the study by Bovens et al. (2006a) belongs here. Interpretive researchers studying organizational culture started to refer to their work as an interpretive approach or a cultural perspective (e.g. Czarniawska-Joerges 1992b) to the subject under study. Yanow, working between policy analysis and organizational studies, talked about turning organizational culture studies into cultural studies of organizations (cf. Smircich 1995; Yanow 1996: 222-227).[52] More recently she argued that the 'culture' metaphor could well be replaced with 'interpretive' (Yanow 2003).

An Interpretive Process Approach and a Question

In the previous paragraphs two choices were made. On the one hand, a process view of culture was preferred over an essence view, and over a subculture view. On the other hand, an interpretive approach was preferred over a variable approach. This study will further develop and use the resulting *interpretive process approach*. Such an approach was also defended recently in sociology. Alexander argued for a 'strong program' for the study of culture, in which '[c]ulture is not a thing but a dimension, not an object to be studied as a dependent variable but as a thread that runs through, and can be teased out of, every conceivable social form' (Alexander 2003: 7).[53] As we just saw, meaning is a central concept in an interpretive approach. Even though actors in organizations, communities and nations can, and often do, share basic images of their world, this approach allows more space for the presence and availability of multiple realities and conflict over them (cf. De Ruijter 2000). It allows for different views of what is true and what is good. This seems appropriate for the study of complex organizational forms, especially political ones. It has concern for struggles over the power to define reality and allows for the possibility that these struggles may extend way beyond formally phrased boundaries of entities like the local authority of a town. Moreover, these struggles are expected to be partly *about* those boundaries, because the boundaries determine who is allowed to govern. If, for example, citizens are seen as those who govern, this gives them the opportunity to be actively involved in the establishment of meaning in the municipality.

What actors in municipalities can be expected to share is the 'recognition of relevant issues' (Feldman 1991: 154). Actors can be expected to orient their actions for some time towards such issues. What is important to keep in mind, however, is that there 'may not be an agreement about whether these issues should be relevant, or about whether they are positively or negatively valued' (Feldman 1991: 154). To clearly separate culture as defined here from other ways of defining it, although these may correspond to the empirical images that actors use, culture is then no longer conceived of as an *a priori* set of values and norms shared in a part of an organization or a group of people that together govern a town. But, neither does this approach assume municipalities to be contexts in which only individually held meanings could be found. On the contrary, this type of analysis 'must go beyond any single individual's understanding of the situation […] It must be concerned with knowledge of the whole, and multiple meaning systems or "counter-realities" that may be in competition with one another' (Smircich 1983b: 162). The approach in this study goes beyond *assuming* consensus or even conflict. It takes culture to be a process (compare Jelinek, et al. 1983; Smircich 1983b; Wright 1994). Nouns like organiza*tion* and govern*ment* are replaced by verbs like organiz*ing* and gover*ning* (cf. Weick 1995: 187-188).[54] This sets culture in motion (Rosaldo 1989: chapter 4; Morgan 1997[1986]: 141). What the study of culture in municipalities becomes is a study of meaning *making*, also referred to as *sense making* (Weick 1995).

Conceiving of culture as a process of sense making connects culture to action in a way that other approaches do not. In practical situations actors give meaning to the concrete issues they are dealing with. Whether the local authority of a city interprets sudden riots in a neighborhood as 'a sign of disobedience' or as 'a call for attention' makes a world of difference. The acts of governing that are based on the selected image in its turn help to sustain or create the meaning that was selected. If, in the example, the local authority sends the municipal police to investigate the riots, it will lead to a different dynamic than if they send social workers. Culture becomes a matter of action that is taking place here and now. Culture is about doing something - making meaning - in order to do something - acting on the basis of meaning. According to those who defend this view 'human groups or society *exists in action*. This picture of human society as action must be the starting point (and the point of return) for any scheme that purports to treat and analyze human society empirically' (Blumer 1969: 6, italics in original). Nevertheless, even if the municipality exists in action, actors in practice for a good part of the time act *as if* the world that surrounds them is more or less solid, like objects (Blumer 1969: 10-12). They look for what is clear enough to start acting from. The images they will use serve simultaneously as images of a certain reality they are confronted with, as well as images of a certain reality they are trying to make happen.

Building on the rough sketch of this approach, the research interest that is central in this study is not what cultures of governing *are* as much as how sense making takes place in practice. I will theorize and empirically study this sense making in action. What will be of importance is how actors construct meanings, making what they are confronted with tangible enough to act upon. Actors in municipalities construct and reconstruct images of the issues they are dealing with. Actors in municipalities also construct and reconstruct images of what it is to govern. This study, therefore, offers the opportunity to reconstruct images of governing which actors might use to give their sense making form. The different images of governing in the Netherlands mentioned in the previous section - the three C's of consultation, compromise and consensus, the politicizing culture and the culture of decisiveness - will be used and elaborated on in the context of Dutch municipalities to reconstruct images actors might use. Finally, of interest is not just what these images are, as much as how they are used. The set-up of this study will enable me to reflect on the dominant image of the Dutch governing culture, i.e., that of governing as a quest for consensus (the three C's). The expectation that can be based on the idea that diversity and ambiguity will be part of culture, is that more than one image of governing will be used in practice. A more formal research question can now be formulated as follows: **How do actors in Dutch municipalities make sense of issues they are confronted with, which images of governing do they use in their sense making, and how do they use these images?**

Researchers - who are actors in their own practice - look for more solidity in their sense making. Interpretive and social constructivist studies in Public Administration and related disciplines are certainly not rare (e.g. Fischer and Forester 1993; Yanow 2000; Rhodes 2002; Hajer and Wagenaar 2003a) and working with the concept of stories is certainly not either (e.g. Martin, et al. 1983; Bennett and Edelman 1985; Kaplan 1986; Forester 1993; van Eeten, et al. 1996; Wagenaar 1997; Czarniawska 1998; Abma 1999; Stone 2002[1988]; Ospina and Dodge 2005).[55] With the help of these kinds of works, the analytical framework in this research (see *Chapter 2*) will provide ideas into the way actors respond when they are confronted with issues of various sorts. This study is in line with the argument that in the understanding of the present day forms of governing, whether referred to with terms like 'governance' or not, research into the constructions of practitioners should play an important role (compare Bevir and Rhodes 2003). At more concrete levels, concepts like the *interpretive process* (Blumer 1969), *practice stories* (Forester 1993) – the images of issues - and what I will call *stories of governing* – the images of governing - offer the opportunity to theorize on a level closer to practice than the central concepts (e.g. attitudes, values, basic assumptions) of other kinds of research into culture.

Empirical cases studies and their analysis (*Chapter 5*, *6, 7, 8, 9*) will enable the further development of ideas. Some additional focus is needed to be able to do proper research. To understand how actors deal with issues I will theorize about and empirically research issues that in one way or another have become *collectively* and *explicitly* recognized as relevant during some period. In terms of empirical research and the use of methods, and in accordance with an interpretive process approach, this research is distinct from many other studies of culture because it searches for answers to the main question by looking at the processes of sense making which give meanings their shape while the research is being conducted. This is different from looking back over longer periods as culture researchers – at least in Dutch Public Administration – have done in their search for culture as a perhaps diverse, but stable phenomenon (e.g. Veenswijk 1995; Hendriks 1996). The empirical research focuses on actors' accounts and tries to stay close to practice, looking for data that are in one way or another 'raw' in the sense of close to the actors' original sense making. A long time ago, in their book on field research, Schatzman and Strauss made a case for this effort when they said that…

> [t]he researcher *must* get close to the people whom he studies; he understands that their actions are best comprehended when observed on the spot – in the natural, ongoing environment where they live and work. If man creates at least some of the conditions for his own actions, then it can be presumed that he acts in his own world, at the very place and time that he is. The researcher himself must be at the location, not only to watch but also to listen to the symbolic sounds that characterize this world. A dialogue with persons in their natural situation will reveal the nuances of meaning from which their perspectives and definitions are continually forged (Schatzman and Strauss 1973: 5-6, italics in original).

This way of doing research is especially suited for bringing out the ambiguities that might surround practical situations. Actors can be observed, interviewed and conversed with while a process is still unfolding. They then do not have the luxury many interview situations offer of looking back at what was decided upon long before. In other words, if governing a town is experienced as a capricious sense-making effort while it is going on, looking at it in 'real-time' might help to see this.

The effort to get close to practice does not have to imply a naïve naturalism that claims to come into contact with the 'real' meanings the actors in the field give to their world. The worldview of the actors in the field, even if it is shared, stable and consistent, can only be reconstructed. After all, the best interpretive research can come up with is 'interpretations of interpretations' (Geertz 1993[1973]: 15). The research design combines a prolonged ethnographic stay in the field that Frissen (1989: 126-136) used with an analysis of actual policy making in Hendriks' work (1996). In addition, I have chosen to 'follow the action.' This involved doing observations and interviews, gathering documents and having conversations about what is at stake in a municipality under study. This empirical research looks at issues that are perceived as relevant at the time of research in the municipality by actors who are part of the formal institution. With this formal institution I point at the bureaucratic-political organization in Dutch towns that most of the time is referred to as the local authorities. Although this comes down to empirical research of issues that are part of the political agenda that is not set by all those actors who give their time and energy to the municipality, it certainly does not prevent the research from following the action beyond the borders of the formal institution. The municipality as a formal institution is meant to provide a basis for the research, more than anything else.

Overview of the Remaining Chapters

In *Chapter 2* the way sense making takes place in an interpretive process will be outlined and the idea of storytelling will be introduced. In addition, a large part of the chapter is dedicated to the description of three particular images of governing, the so-called *stories of governing*. The topic of *Chapter 3* is the way research has been done. In *Part II* the cases will be presented. The first chapter of this second part, *Chapter 4*, gives a short introduction to the Dutch municipality. The first case study will be presented in *Chapter 5*. Actors in and around the local authority of Heart-less Town will be talking about a new center for the town. In the second case study, presented in *Chapter 6*, the same local authority tries to cope with a sudden hole in the municipality's budget through a so-called core tasks debate. The third case study will be presented in *Chapter 7*. In that case the local authority of Free City gets into an administrative crisis after three members of the board of mayor and aldermen publicly announce a lack of faith in their colleague. In *Chapter 8*, the fourth case study deals with the reconstruction of a terrain in a neighborhood in Free City. *Part III* is dedicated to further analysis and conclusions. In *Chapter 9* the four cases will be compared. A more substantive view of the interpretive process and storytelling in it will be the result. *Chapter 10* will first review the lessons learned. This last chapter will also return to the discussion on culture in municipalities and give some recommendations for practice.

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[1] 'Bestuurscultuur.'

[2] My translation. Original text: 'Bestuurscultuur is de echte sleutel voor verbetering. In de afgelopen vier jaar constateren wij dat de bestuurscultuur misschien wel de belangrijkste factor is voor de vernieuwing van het lokaal bestuur. En dat terwijl aandacht voor de bestuurscultuur er eigenlijk alleen is wanneer deze de gemeente behoorlijk ontwricht […]. Het is opmerkelijk dat de bestuurscultuur in veel gemeenten eigenlijk geen issue is. Er zouden impulsen moeten worden gegeven zodat gemeenten meer aandacht gaan besteden aan bestuurscultuur, ook wanneer er (nog) geen problematische situaties zijn […].'

[3] On a national scale "Pim Fortuyn revolt" (the big voter loss that the big parties suffered in the 2002 elections) and the success of local political parties was linked to the governing culture of the Netherlands (Bossenbroek 2003). In addition to that, the prime minister initi-

ated the so-called discussion on ‘values and norms’. A wider trend that often is linked with many of these kinds of developments is the ‘gap’ that might or might not have widened between citizens and government.

[4] ‘Onder een gesloten dak groeit geen gras’.

[5] ‘Troonrede’.

[6] ‘In reactie op de problemen in ons land wil de regering inhoud geven aan een nieuwe bestuurscultuur. Een cultuur waarin maatschappelijke problemen worden benoemd, afwegingen helder worden gemaakt, besluiten verantwoord en in het noodzakelijke tempo worden genomen, en wetten worden nageleefd. De regering wil het debat over gedeelde waarden entameren. De normen in de samenleving dienen te worden versterkt.’

[7] The statement about the governing culture was closely related to a national discussion on values and norms that the Dutch government, and especially Prime Minister Balkenende, at that time wanted to start.

[8] ‘Verkokerd’.

[9] ‘Burgers, media, wetenschappers en politici hebben naar aanleiding van verschillende incidenten naar voren gebracht dat er een culturele revolutie of culturele omslag moet plaatsvinden binnen de overheid. Deze maatschappelijke en politieke wens om te komen tot een culturele verandering kan de rijksoverheid niet naast zich neerleggen.’

[10] My translation.

[11] I use ‘public administration’ to refer to the practice. I use ‘Public Administration’ to refer to the study of this practice.

[12] Political Sciences are included here.

[13] The exception is Van Poelje, whose work is referred to later on.

[14] Almond and Verba use the concept of ‘self’ instead of ‘individual.’

[15] It has also been referred to as grid-group theory, among others. Here I will follow mostly the central theoretical work of Thompson et al. (1990). I thus ignore many of the differences within the Cultural Theory approach.

[16] A fifth way of life is used in part of the Cultural Theory literature to talk about actors who are not part of social life at all. These actors take the role of the *hermit*.

[17] The critique of Almond and Verba concentrated on the way their research design had led them to typify *the* culture of a nation while according to Thompson et al. (1990: 247-248) it is important to keep in mind that in a nation the each of the viable political cultures - ways of life – can be found, albeit in varying proportions. Moreover, they compete with each other.

[18] Some have been quite strict in their defense of the basic principles that form the basis of the theory. Thompson et al., contributing the major theoretical work in the Cultural Theory approach, wanted to combine an interpretive, social constructivist search for meaning with an explanatory model (Thompson, et al. 1990: xiii).

[19] Whereas Van Gunsteren used Cultural Theory mainly to talk about the plurality of society, Hoppe and Peterse used the theory to look at risk management and Hoppe elaborated on the idea of four different types of problems. It is not the case that all political culture researchers restrict themselves to looking for *the* culture of a nation. Daemen (1990), for example, did stress the idea of subcultures and fragmentation within the context of a nation like the Netherlands. Engbersen looked at the issue of unemployment and welfare administration in Rotterdam. An exception to the more qualitative application of Cultural Theory can be found in the work of Breed (2007). Breed looked at strategic perceptions of top civil servants using a survey.

[20] Instead of rules, earlier in his book Hendriks used the concept of 'habits' (Hendriks 1996: 51). He also invokes the concepts of preferences and aspirations. This use of the culture concept resembles that of Gamson and Lasch (1983), who talked about the culture of issues.

[21] Again connecting the more institutionally directed approaches and Cultural Theory, Hendriks recently united the two in his quest for a 'vital democracy' (Hendriks 2006).

[22] This is how Veenswijk (1995) referred to his own approach, which is for an important part in accordance with Frissen's central fourth approach. Frissen himself used different concepts to describe the approach, most dominant of which is the 'culture sociological' approach. Noordergraaf et al. (2004) also referred to this approach as a metaphorical approach.

[23] What is problematic about this view of culture is that it is difficult to see it as totally distinctive from the first view, since, if an organization is a phenomenon in a culture, it is part of this culture and thus also can be expected to reflect this culture. A cultural or interpretive analysis and a contingency view thus certainly do not exclude each other. See for instance the work of Yanow (1996).

[24] Frissen himself located early work in Cultural Theory in the fourth approach. Hendriks saw, most of all, a connection with the third approach, but also with the fourth.

[25] Organizational culture as a root metaphor denies the possibility of causality, whereas culture as a sub-system looks for laws of culture. The difference between culture as an aspect and culture as a root metaphor is not clear enough for Veenswijk either.

[26] I have used the second updated version of Schein's work (1992), in a reprint edition (1997). There are several alterations in this work when compared to the first version. The Council for Public Administration wrote a report (Raad voor het Openbaar Bestuur 2004) following the work of Schein (1997[1985]). In accordance with Veenswijk, the Council described organizational culture is as a layered concept. The Council concluded that a better government could be characterized by four features: flexible, directed at the environment, directed at results and willing to work together. Also, mostly using the concept of organizational culture, various authors in the Dutch practice literature reflect on culture and cultural change. An example is Straathof and Van Dijk (2003), following up mostly on the work of Schein (1997[1985]).

[27] Another way to describe the idea of levels of culture can be found in the work of Hofstede (1994[1991]: 7-10). He used the image of an onion to argue that culture has different levels of depth, and these levels can be seen as the skins of an onion. In the core of the onion we can find values. One level up there are rituals, followed by heroes, and the outer skin is made up of symbols.

[28] Frissen had also already taken notice of it at an early stage (Frissen 1985: 187). It was also part of Smirchic's treatment of organizational culture (Smircich 1983a).

[29] In addition to the use and development of the culture concepts in Public Administration dealt with above, and in collaboration with a variety sub-disciplines, two edited volumes (Ringeling 1985a; van Heffen, et al. 1996), many essays (e.g. Kickert and Snellen 1986; Bekke 1992; Inglehart and Andeweg 1993; Schaap and Van Twist 1997; Hofstede 2004), a book (Nieuwenkamp 2001) and a journal issue (Noordegraaf, et al. 2004) were dedicated to or touched upon culture. In these essays, that have various contributions of researchers who developed their own approach in the years before, organizational, administrative and policy culture are used as concepts. The most innovative approach of the last few years has been the one Noordergraaf et al. (compare De Ruijter and Verweel 2003; 2004) advocated. They stated that Public Administration should use a more anthropologically inspired notion of

culture that is used in organizational sciences. Other contributions, however interesting, did not lead to many new perspectives or studies since their appearance. The early essays on administrative culture in Ringeling (1985a) contained a first contribution by Frissen (1985) to the subject in which he put forward the idea of myths.

[30] Lijphart borrowed the idea of *role culture* (Lijphart 1975[1968]: 122) from Almond and Verba (Almond and Verba 1963). Following Almond and Verba, Lijphart saw role culture as a part of the political culture, but to be distinguished from 'mass culture.' In his use of political culture, however, mass culture should be seen. Just like he did not develop a separate concept of political culture or a distinctive methodological approach, Lijphart did not theorize much on the idea of role culture.

[31] Within the context of the volume, the concept of *governing culture* was most clearly taken up from an historical angle. This contribution and later a short introduction to a special issue on governing culture in a history journal (Randeraad and Wolffram 1998; Randeraad 2003) focused on the governing culture of the nation. To reflect on governing culture, the authors go back as far as the sixteenth century. Culture in this contributions is, and this does not surprise at all, connected to 'continuity, tenacity [and] the long term' (Randeraad 2003: 7). Talking about this long term, Kickert stresses 'the age-old Dutch State traditions of tolerance, pragmatism and consensus' (Kickert 2003: 119).

[32] 'Schikken en plooien'.

[33] It is interesting to see that an earlier version of Korsten and Tops's book was a lot less elaborate on the influence of culture. The new version added an emphasis on internal governing and administrative culture. The relation and specific content of four different kinds of culture they distinguish remain vague. Perhaps they were mostly used to introducing new chapters to the book.

[34] They use the term opinions, not normative images, but in my view these are interchangeable in the context.

[35] This last book could also have been situated in the literature on organizational culture, since it was, for the most part, making use of that literature.

[36] As could have become clear earlier in this chapter, the commission in charge of dualization became aware of this fundamentality of culture in the end.

[37] 'Herkenbaarheid en Slagvaardigheid'. It is not clear whether Tops refers to the recognizability of actors, policies or both. The last option seems most likely.

[38] They also used document analysis, interviewing and some observation of focus groups.

[39] This idea of governing culture could also fit with Frissen's contingency approach to organizational culture, in which the societal culture determines the culture of an organization. The determination, however, is expected to take place not through membership of a societal culture but through direct interaction with society.

[40] Two researchers working on this project had themselves promoted an innovative approach to culture in and around public organizations in the Dutch context (Noordegraaf, et al. 2004).

[41] '…door bestuurders en bestuurlijke partijen en partners gedeelde manieren van denken en doen.'

[42] Czarniawska-Joerges made a distinction between ostensive definitions and performative definitions. The first ones are attempts to explain principles and the second type of definition explore practices. These types of definitions can be seen as parallel to thing definitions and process definitions, respectively. The overlap between the two dimensions is clear here. The ostensive definitions are more likely part of positivist research and the performative of interpretive research.

[43] Although Veenswijk used Schein to build his interpretive approach, it is very well defensible to look at Schein as a positivist, or at least as a realist scientist (Yanow and Adams 1998). His attention to the role of leadership and the creation of culture might put him with those who promise instrumental change of culture. Schein, in later editions of his main work (originally mid-1980s), also responded to his critics by admitting to at least the idea of differentiation and ambiguity (Schein 1997[1985]: 11). In fact, Schein is not always clear on the extent to which members of an organization share culture. In a smart way he avoids taking a position. He talks about the culture of groups. Groups might be both organizations *and* groups within organizations. A group, then, seems to be various people sharing basic assumptions. He weakens his point when arguing that '[i]f the concept of culture is to have any utility, however, it should draw attention to those things that are the product of our human need for stability, consistency, and meaning. Cultural formation, therefore, is always, by definition, a *striving towards patterning and integration*, even though the actual history of experiences of many groups prevents them from ever achieving a clear-cut epistemology' (Schein 1997[1985]: 11, italics in the original). Veenswijk, even though he made use of Schein in important ways, does not fall into this category because he allowed for differentiation and even some ambiguity.

[44] This is not the only way to read Geertz's work, though. See also Wright (1994).

[45] His last chapter even talks about fragmentation, but his theoretical ideas do not seem very developed to carry such complexity.

[46] A process view can also be found in policy analysis. It view focuses on the complexity of public policy processes (Klijn 1997: 15-16).

[47] Even if Bovens et al. (2006a: 25-27) invoked a social constructivist view of culture, the way they operationalized it in shared traditions, styles and habits conflicts with such an approach.

[48] Some positions could also be categorized as in between these two.

[49] The Volendam research (Cachet, et al. 2001) is an exception.

[50] For Veenswijk this feature was the most important feature that separated interpretive studies from other culture studies.

[51] Some works reviewed are clearly defined as interpretive and their authors elaborate on what this involves. Others only become part of this category because their use of methods does not make them positivist.

[52] Yanow also argued to drop the concept of culture in policy analysis (Yanow 2003) and Smircich asked attention for the involvement of the researcher as the one representing culture.

[53] It also unites Frissen's (1989) aspect and metaphor view. According to Alexander, it would be better to turn the Sociology of Culture into a Cultural Sociology.

[54] In Weick's work the concept of culture is not very central (exception Weick 1985: 188-189; 1995).

[55] In this study I will talk about an interpretive approach and not about a narrative approach, not to complicate matters. For me a narrative approach is a category within interpretive approaches, focusing specifically on stories and storytelling.

2 The Interpretive Process

2.1 Issues and Questions

The research approach for this study, as formulated in the first chapter, unites an interpretive epistemology with a social constructivist (process) view of reality. In this chapter a theoretical response to the central question under study – how do actors in municipalities make sense of issues they are confronted with, which images of governing do they use in their sense making and how? – is presented. In short, this chapter is about how making sense of an issue occurs. It puts forward concepts and ideas that make the study of culture-as-a-process possible. The most important concepts that are introduced include the interpretive process and stories: practice stories and stories of governing. As was made clear in the previous chapter, the application of the approach used here to study culture in local government is rare. Nevertheless, this kind of approach, as such, is not new. This chapter has been particularly inspired by previous studies on sense making in organizational and policy practice (Weick 1995; Yanow 2000; Stone 2002[1988]),[1] work on framing (Schön 1994[1979]; Schön and Rein 1994), and on storytelling (Forester 1993; Czarniawska 1997).[2]

The Meanings of Issues

In the previous chapter I argued that culture is a matter of sense making. This statement points to the strong connection between meaning and action. Blumer (1969: 2; compare Spradley 1980: 3-12) formulated three premises that give a more detailed picture of this. First of all, actors act towards things on the basis of the meanings that things have for them (cf. Boulding 1969[1961]: 6; Bevir and Rhodes 2003: 18-19). Secondly, the meanings of things derive from, or arise out of, the social interaction actors have with one another. According to the third premise, these meanings are handled in, and modified through, *an interpretive process* used by actors when dealing with the things they encounter.[3] A fourth premise could be added: meaning is context-dependent (Laclau and Mouffe 1990: 100-103). That is to say, what a thing is becomes clear in its relation to other things, or through the way things are used in social action. Things get a meaning from the context in which they are placed. Nevertheless, context does not have a meaning itself. Contexts themselves are also under construction. From this it can be concluded that the interpretive process requires establishing meaningful contexts that will help to attribute meanings to things. These premises summarize how sense making is understood in this chapter. To analyze how this functions in local government, I will focus upon actors in municipalities and the 'things' (I will call them *issues)* they are confronted with.

In and around *municipalities actors* are constantly confronted with *issues*.[4] What municipalities are, and who the actors in municipalities are, will be dealt with more concretely in *Section 2.4* and *Chapter 4*. Let us, just for now, say that actors are entities capable of acting, and a municipality is a context in which acts regarding societal issues are undertaken. Issues can be of all sorts. For instance, there is the issue of a riot in a neighborhood, the issue of the condition of the railroad track and so on. Governing itself can be an issue as well. Issues can be more or less familiar, but they can also suddenly manifest themselves in the more concrete form of an event. It could be, for example, that actors are confronted with the explosion of a firework factory, the announcement of a lay-off, the failure of a planning project, a public official taking bribes, riots in a neighborhood, and so on. Actors, at some point in time, might recognize issues as relevant. In fact, there are many possible issues that *could be* recognized as such, but not all of them are recognized to the same extent.[5] Moreover, it is not always the case that the issues that are recognized are the issues that 'hurt' people, to paraphrase Edelman (1988: 13). Keeping certain issues from being recognized warrants a study of interpretation[6] in its own right (Bachrach and Baratz 1962; Lukes 1974). To understand how actors deal with issues I have theorized about and empirically researched issues that, in one way or another, have become *collectively* and *explicitly* recognized as relevant during some period. The focus will not be that of the mobilization of bias - the way some issues are organized in and others out of politics, but rather it will focus upon 'the more subtle process in which some definitions of issues [in the sense of representations of issues in practice, MvH] are organized into politics while other definitions are organized out' (Hajer 1995: 42). In *Chapter 3* the decision to concentrate on collectively recognized issues will be discussed in more detail. For now, it is important to keep in mind that looking at the sense making surrounding issues involves looking for the way some possible meanings of issues are hidden, while others become dominant (see *Section 2.2*).

Two Questions of Sense Making

When confronted with issues of general relevance, actors in municipalities will typically ask themselves two sense-making questions.[7] The first question regards the meanings of an issue (compare Hummel 1991; cf. Goffman 1997: 153): *What is going on?* More general or familiar issues have a history that is connected to them, including meanings that were created in the past. In the case of more general or familiar issues, the question could therefore have the more general form of: What is the situation? Nevertheless, in cases where a past history is experienced as relevant to the present situation, the meanings that were created in the past still have to be connected to the situation at hand when the relevance of an issue increases. In the case of events the question will have the form of: What has happened? The meanings being produced are to some extent always ambiguous. Following from Blumer's premises (1969), that is to say that since issues do not have a meaning all by themselves, multiple answers to the question what is going on are always possible. Therefore, to come to an answer actors have to socially construct it.

In practice, actors do not just try to understand what is going on, in the sense of mentally comprehending it. Practice is most often action-oriented, in the sense that actors in practice are required to act on the situation they encounter (Schön and Rein 1994: 29; Wagenaar 1997: 13; 2004: 649-650).[8] Actors, both individually and collectively, find themselves part of situations in which they feel the need to respond to issues with which they are confronted. For instance, issues are undertaken in the position of a mayor with 'public order' among the priorities to be dealt with. Or alternatively, actors form the local authority that is supposed to safeguard 'the public interest' when social conflicts arise. The second sense-making question is then: *What should we do?*[9] This question is not just directed at the issue at hand, it also contains reference to the meanings of governing itself. 'We' can only act towards an issue if we know who we are and what we do. Governing can be expected to form a part of the meaningful context of issues that actors act towards. Therefore, in addition to the meaning of issues, there are the meanings of governing (see *Chapter 3*). Making sense of an issue involves making sense of sense making. Or, as Weick (1995: 20) put it, sense making is grounded in identity construction.

2.2 Engaging in the Interpretive Process

If we look at the two questions above as questions that actors in municipalities collectively ask themselves, we could decide on two moments in time between which the interpretive process (Blumer 1969: 2) takes place (see *Figure 2.1*). The interpretive process begins when members of a collective start to find an issue significant. When an issue gets some relevance for the collective, actors will put forward statements that will begin to shape what an issue means (A).[10] These are first descriptions of what is going on. After this a struggle over meaning will take place (B). Although the term 'struggle over meaning' might invoke the idea that actors fundamentally disagree over the meaning of an issue, this does not have to be the case. An issue can also have a similar meaning for the actors involved, leading to consensus over both what is going on and - if governing is also given a similar meaning - what has to be done in response to it. An issue can have many meanings for many different actors without there ever being a struggle over what is going on or what has to be done. In other words, the period of struggle may not be as antagonistic as the term might suggest. At the end of the interpretive process, the relevance of an issue diminishes. This diminished relevance can be the result of a collectively taken decision that temporally fixes the meanings of the issue and marginalizes alternative views (C) and allows for collective action. It can also occur when another issue gains relevance at the cost of the meaning making directed at the first issue.

(A) *Initial Meaning(s) of Issue (1)* → (B) *Struggle over Meaning* → (C) *Final Meaning(s) of Issue (1)* → *Collective Action*

or

Initial Meaning(s) of Issue (2) → *Struggle over Meaning* → ...

Figure 2.1: The Interpretive Process

As the literature on decision making (e.g. Teisman 2000) illustrates, processes can be modeled in more complicated ways. Attention can be drawn to the ways in which various issues are joined while interpreting takes place. In addition, various issues in municipalities are often considered relevant at one time. *Decision making* itself, however, is not the focus of this study. Decision making as an analytical concept draws attention primarily to moments in which known issues are decided upon, and less to the way in which issues are constructed throughout the process. Even if the meaning of an issue might become temporally fixed through decision making, it will hardly help to understand how meaning was created in the first place.

Acts of Sense Making

In very general terms the interpretive process can involve framing, negotiating and enacting contexts that will give meaning to issues. Contexts include ways of (re)constructing reality. Before, during and after this reality is decided upon, actors will be busy trying to discover it. Since various ways of looking at reality are always possible, during the interpretive process actors present just one of the possible versions of reality (although this version might include what others would take to be more than one version). Framing (compare Rein and Schön 1977; compare Bateson 1978[1972]; Goffman 1997) here is meant to point to giving accounts that draw attention to a certain definition of reality.[11] When actors frame an issue in a certain way, what they present is not necessarily a reality they believe in. It can, nevertheless, be expected to be a version of reality that they want others to see or accept as accurate (cf. Alexander 2004a: 529). When the truth is not agreed upon, but still has to be established among actors who disagree, these actors might also negotiate different versions of reality. Negotiation involves looking for common ground. Perhaps actors will try to integrate various available versions of reality into a new one that both parties agree on. This could be called *re*framing (Schön 1994[1979]; Schön and Rein 1994).[12]

In addition to more explicit framing and negotiating, actors might enact what is going on. Weick (1979: 147-169; 1995: 30-38) focused attention on the way actors enact a certain meaning. Actors often start preparing collective action, or executing it, as if a collectively decided upon meaning is already present. Talking about the creation of elements of what here are called meaningful contexts, Weick (1995: 31) said, '[w]hen people enact laws, they undefined space, time, and action and draw lines, establish categories, and coin labels that create new features of the environment that did not exist before.' Mixing explicit statements and enactment, actors might present one version of reality and act out another. Refraining from, shortcutting or postponing the framing or enactment of a certain view of reality can also be interpreted as meaningful (Blumer 1969: 16; compare Weick 1995: 37). Actors might well want to wait to see what other actors do. They might not have the faintest idea of the reality they are facing.

Finally, in their framing, negotiating and enacting, actors might, either deliberately or not, be hiding views of reality they are or are not aware of. If they or their colleagues, for example, are actively involved in issues, they might not want to draw too much attention to themselves or the contexts that they see themselves a part of. They might also be so familiar with looking at reality in a certain way that they are incapable of seeing it differently. These hidden views of reality are not uninteresting. They tell us about what is going on in municipal life but, for one reason or another is ignored in public sense making. They form a backstage – those interpretations that are consciously hidden from the public - and an outside – those interpretations that never make it to the public sense making (Goffman 1959: 106-140). By uncovering these interpretations, researchers can show how establishing the meanings of one group of actors can be at the expense of the realities of other groups. In total, next to initial meanings, there are meanings that are constructed in a struggle over meaning and final meanings, as well as hidden meanings.

Dynamic and Symbolic

Two points can be added to the general outline of the interpretive process. First, it is important to notice that the interpretive process is dynamic. On the one hand, both the beginning and the end of an interpretive process will probably not be very clear. Sense making is something that never starts (Weick 1995: 43-49) or stops. It never starts because actors in practice find themselves always in the middle of things; they will often 'orient to their lives as if from midstream because precisely what will happen next, and when it will happen, cannot be predicted. The future, by its very nature, is uncertain' (Rosaldo 1989: 107). It never stops because the meaning of an issue will never be totally fixed. Actors at some point in time focus their attention on other issues. But even if actors move to other issues, the meaning of the initial issue will alter according to the meaning it is given in some future present. As Edelman (1988: 29) notices, '[t]he past and the future people construct are bound to be rationalizations of their current social worlds […].' To understand how issues acquire meanings during a certain period, even if they are temporal, the researcher has to reconstruct the beginning and the end of an interpretive process.

On the other hand, not only the beginning and the end of an interpretive process are unclear, the order of what is going on between the beginning and the end is also dynamic. Framing, negotiating and enacting thus do not have a strict order in practice. During the interpretive process actors might reflect on what is going on and what should be done almost simultaneously. They also answer these questions for themselves, their groups, or the collective. They do not necessarily leave the second question for later. Actors might already have solutions that they want to couple to problems that are still under construction. Actors then will be moving in circles, dynamically fixing the meaning of issues through their diverse acts of sense making. Actors might find out what meaning an issue has for them and others through engaging in the process itself (cf. Noordegraaf 2002). In the decision-making literature, very dynamic processes have been referred to as garbage-can processes (Cohen, et al. 1976). Orr (1996), borrowing the concept from the anthropologist Levi-Strauss, called the way actors go about make sense 'bricolage': 'the piecing together of an understanding of a situation and of possible courses of action' (1996: 11). When actors enact the meaning of an issue they typically produce the answer to what is going on through an answer to what should be done. Some have even argued that the meaning of what is going on is, more than anything else, the result of the enactment of meanings, more than deliberately establishing them through debate (Weick 1995).

Moreover, the more actors aim to combine the answer to what is going on with an answer to what should be done, as we can expect actors in practice to be doing, the more the interpretive process itself becomes something that is made sense of itself. The acts of sense making become part of the issue that actors make sense of. If a local authority has a group of residents of a neighborhood violently arrested for growing hallucinogenic plants under their roof, this enactment of a perpetration might be seen as part of a problematic issue, while it only tried to be a solution. The reality of the issue and the reality of sense making are not separate, because the second sense-making question asks something about governing in its relation to the reality of the issue. Put differently, ways of looking at the issue and ways of looking at governing have to be related in some way, and perhaps even aligned, in order to establish answers to both questions. If actors want to act on issues in a certain way, they should pay attention to the definition of issues. If actors do not want to get involved in the issue, they would do well to make sure the issue is defined in a way that makes it somebody else's problem or no problem at all. From the very start of an interpretive process, an overlap between the world governed and the world of governing can occur when the reality of the issue and the reality of governing coincide. For example, it occurs when actors in municipalities deal with the failed plans of their own making.

A second point that can be made about the interpretive process is that it is a process in which actors communicate through symbols. As Stone (2002[1988]: 137) tells us, '[a] symbol is anything that stands for something else.' Symbols can be seen as 'vehicles of meaning' (Swidler 1986) that allow actors to engage in sense making. Symbols, on the one hand, help to construct an image of reality, but on the other hand leave room for multiple and changing meanings. This ambiguity of symbols does not necessarily hamper the sense making. It might enable 'the transformation of individual intentions and actions into collective results and purposes' (Stone 2002[1988]: 157), because actors can recognize their own versions of reality in the ones presented.

An important example of the working of symbols in and around government is language (Edelman 1988: 103-119; Van Twist 1995: 79-80). Language, as a general human meaningful context or a system of symbols, does not 'mirror an "objective reality," but rather creates it by organizing meaningful perceptions abstracted from a complex, bewildering world' (Edelman 1967: 218). Even though a variety of interpretations is always possible, the meaning of a word is partly fixed when it is placed in a sentence. And the meaning of a sentence becomes partly fixed in a paragraph, and so on. Rein and Schön have given attention to the way the mere name an issue gets 'focuses attention on certain elements and leads to neglect others' (Rein and Schön 1993: 211). However, language does not decide the ways of looking at reality. It allows for the possibility of its basic elements (words, sentences) to mean more than one thing at the same time for different audiences. Especially the metaphorical nature of language (Lakoff and Johnson 1980) allows actors to use the same word or phrase, but to connect it to a totally different reality, something Schön (1994[1979]) did not pay attention to (van Hulst 2008, forthcoming). Swaffield (1998), for instance, found that the word 'landscape' for various decision makers and decision influencers in New Zealand meant different things. These different meanings, seven in total, were part of as many ways of thinking about landscape policies. In municipalities actors might all find the issue of security policy in the municipality important, but give various meanings to the word 'security.' Actors also have other general symbol systems besides language at their disposal. An alternative system of symbols actors in practice use in their sense making is that of mathematics (Stone 2002[1988]: 163-187). Numbers can substitute for words, and calculations with numbers can be used to substitute reasoning for words.

2.3 Sense Making as Storytelling

Until now, making sense has been described as giving issues a meaningful context that reflects a certain version of reality. That is a rather abstract way of dealing with the matter. The question that should be answered is what form these meaningful contexts might be given in practice. The meaningful contexts that can be found in concrete interpretive processes can be seen as stories (compare Rein and Schön 1977; Forester 1993). As the philosopher Macintyre stated: 'I can only ask the question, "What am I to do?" if I can answer the prior question, "Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?"' (Macintyre 1985[1981]: 216)[13] The argument is that sense making takes the form of storytelling, because actors in social life understand their lives in the form of stories. From this it can be argued that concrete meaningful contexts can themselves be understood as stories. To put it differently, issues become meaningful because of their placement in a story (compare Riessman 1993: 18).[14] As Schön said (1994[1979]: 146; compare: Schön and Rein 1994: 26), '[e]ach story conveys a very different view of reality and represents a special way of seeing. From a situation that is vague, ambiguous, and indeterminate (or rich and complex, depending on one's frame of mind), each story selects and names different features and relations which become the "things" of the story – what the story is about.'

Following Aristotle, a story could be defined as 'an organized form of discourse with a plot in three parts: beginning, middle and end' (Kaplan 1993: 171).[15] In a story, what happens becomes part of a sequence of events through time - a beginning, middle and end - that gives meaning to it - a plot. However, although the idea that stories have beginnings, middles and ends tells us something about how to write an Aristotelian tragedy, it may not tell us much about the form stories might have in practice. Nothing assures us that sense making in municipalities is so obvious and signals itself in the archetypical form of stories with beginnings, middles and ends. A more pragmatic approach to stories is more helpful in the study of local government practice.

Stories in this study are meaningful contexts. To be precise: stories attribute meanings, enabling actors to decide what is going on and what should be done. This makes them similar to concepts like storylines (Hajer 1993; 1995) and frames (Rein and Schön 1977; Schön 1994[1979]), although the 'everyday' connotation of stories points more at the proximity to practice that is aimed at here.[16] Like frames and storylines, stories are not the raw data that can be encountered in the field. They have to be reconstructed by an analyst. This reconstruction can be facilitated with the help of three story elements: *settings, events* and *entities* (compare Burke 1989: 135-138; cf. Czarniawska 1997: 39).[17] The setting of stories is the general background against which what is going on is supposed to be taking place. Events are what actually happened. Entities are those human and non-human 'things' that are involved in a story. A story brings these three elements together. Below, I will deal more substantively with the story elements. Describing planning activities, but also arguably relevant to local government, Forester suggests that stories do '[…] the descriptive work of reportage, moral work of constructing character and reputation (of oneself and others), political work of identifying friends and foes, interests and needs, and most importantly […] deliberative work of considering means and ends, values and options, what is relevant and significant, what is possible and what matters, all together' (Forester 1999: 29).[18]

What differentiates this view from a stricter definition of stories is that it enables us to see what actors are trying to *do* when they deal with what is going on, and what should be done. Although actors might locate what is going on at the beginning, middle and end of a story, the paradoxical aim of telling a story is to find out what the story is.[19] Actors in practice propose stories all of the time in order to respond to the questions 'what is going on?' and 'what should we do?'. They hope that other actors will agree and help to turn the line of reasoning they use into some sort of collective action.

When it comes to making sense of issues in municipalities, it is possible to distinguish between two types of stories that are constructed and used during the interpretive process: *practice stories* and *stories of governing*. The first type of stories is concrete and directed towards the meaning(s) of an issue, while the second type is general and directed at the meaning of governing. Put differently, practice stories are particular accounts about what is going on and possibly about what should be done. Stories of governing are general accounts about the way actors in municipalities should come up with answers to the sense making questions. They are stories about the interpretive process itself. They make sense of the sense making. In the next two paragraphs the two kinds of stories are discussed.

Practice Stories

The meanings of an issue are constructed in practice stories (Forester 1993). These stories '[set] out a view of what is wrong and what needs fixing' (Schön 1994[1979]: 144). They can be found in what actors do - and do not do – to present answers to the two sense-making questions (*what is going on?* and *what should we do?*). Practice stories most clearly stand out in the accounts actors give of what is going on in the form of reports, during meetings, in (newspaper) interviews and so on. Stone (2002[1988]: 138-145) gave an insightful example of what is meant by practice stories. Here is her *story of decline* (Stone 2002[1988]: 138): 'In the beginning things were pretty good. But they got worse. In fact, right now, they are nearly intolerable. Something must be done.'

The setting of stories is the general background against which what is going on is supposed to be taking place. Time and space are the two relevant dimensions of a setting. A setting can be, for instance, a neighborhood in the city during the year 2006. The setting can theoretically take up from a couple of seconds to a couple of decades, and can range from a street in a small municipality to the world at large. A setting can be thought of as something physical like a building, but might also be something more abstract like an epoch or a relationship. A combination of time and space is made when an actor argues that 'to understand what happened yesterday you have to know what happened in the relationships among neighborhood residents during the last two years.' Actors can also choose to locate what is going on in the town or even society at large. Moreover, even though a setting is introduced, it might not be very clear what is exactly meant by that setting. What is important is that with a setting the storyteller 'waves' at the background, giving general meaning to what is going on (Wagenaar 2004: 648-649), trusting its taken-for-grantedness.

In addition to setting, practice stories will contain a description of events over time. In fact, according to many researchers, this is an essential element of stories

(Riessman 1993: 17): events placed in a temporal order. Consider the difference between the two sequences of three events:

Policeman Erik tried to arrest neighborhood resident Jan.
A riot began on Central Square.
Jan threw a brick.

And,
Jan threw a brick.
A riot began on Central Square.
Policeman Erik tried to arrest neighborhood resident Jan.

In the first example, the riot might seem the result of the action of Policeman Erik. Jan then throws a brick in the chaotic setting of a riot. In the second sequence, Jan throwing the brick might seem to have caused a riot. Policeman Erik then reacts to the situation by trying to arrest the one who started it all. The order of the events thus creates the meaning of separate events. The connections between the separate events now become possible in the form of motives that drive events. *Because* Jan threw a brick, a riot began and Erik tried to arrest Jan.

Another important lesson can be drawn from the example. Events might be described as concrete acts, but they can also be framed more abstractly in terms of developments or settings, as the example shows. The riot that started is an event, but similarly can be seen as the development of or a setting for the events that follow. In the case of the example, it might therefore be important for those who participate in interpreting what is going on to know what the background of the first event was, to make it meaningful. Starting off with the riot that begins would give both events a setting and make the actors act somewhat according to what can be expected during a riot:[20]

A riot began on Central Square.
Policeman Erik tried to arrest neighborhood resident Jan.
Jan threw a brick.

A riot began on Central Square.
Jan threw a brick.
Policeman Erik tried to arrest neighborhood resident Jan.

Of course this example is at a microscopic level, but it indicates the dynamic that is involved in storytelling events. Other examples of events are the explosion of a firework factory, a lay-off in an organization or just the announcement of a lay-off in an organization, a growing conflict between two football clubs and so on. There is no way to tell beforehand exactly what events actors in practice will put forward as relevant to a certain issue, nor how far in the past an actor wants to begin his story (Czarniawska 2004), or how far forward it will end.[21] Moreover, there is no reason to expect that actors in practice will make use of the same events when they tell their stories. It can be expected that actors do not just ignore events; they might talk at different levels of abstraction about what is going on and what should be done. This, of course, has a lot to do with the setting in which they place the issue. Jan throwing a brick seems of minor relevance to what is going on in the relationships between the neighborhood and the police as it developed over the last twenty years, whereas it might be of central importance to what happened yesterday at Central Square.

Entities are those human and non-human ‘things’ that are involved in the practice story. Examples of entities are neighborhood resident Jan, Policeman Erik, the leader of the Socialist Party, but also the residents of neighborhood Y, the municipality, a policy or even a brick. When actors construct entities, they categorize or ‘name’ them (Edelman 1964; Rein and Schön 1977; Schön 1994[1979]: 131) as well, calling them, for instance, ‘residents,’ ‘citizens,’ or ‘voters’ (so also stories of governing below). Important general categorizations in stories include distinctions between those who are treated as actively contributing to the issue, and those who are not. In the first category we can find, for example, resident Jan who threw a brick, or a local factory dumping poison in a lake. Among entities like these, there might be those who are blamed, and those who are praised for what is going on (cf. Stone 2002[1988]: 139). These are the villains and heroes of the story with their own attributed motives. In many stories, acting entities can be expected to be the most important entities because they carry the events. Entities might also be those who were merely acted upon, e.g., shop owner Mr. De Boer whose windows were broken during the riot or children swimming in the contaminated lake. Entities are then more likely to be presented as victims or beneficiaries, who only suffer or benefit from the consequences of what is going on. Non-active entities like a brick might also be presented as the means through which acts took place. In sum, entities in a story involve human or non-human actors who do the acting, the means through which they act, and the actors (or objects) that are affected by events.

Stories of Governing

Although actors in municipalities have quite some room to find out what is going on and what should be done, they cannot be expected to invent all of their sense making from scratch. Apart from, and in combination with, the ideas they have about the institutional make-up of the municipality, actors will make use of stories about governing. These stories of governing are about the meaning(s) of governing. They are stories about the interpretive process. They help to turn a problem in a practice story into a solution that the municipality can offer. They ‘tell’ actors in municipalities how the interpretive process looked, looks, could look and should look. They simultaneously provide images of how things have been done in the past, and how they could be or should be done in the future. Although a story of governing provides a specific language or jargon (Edelman 1964: 130-151), it partly shares language with other stories. Together, stories of governing form a ‘repertoire of plots’ (Czarniawska 1997: 18) that are available to actors in practice. They are images that have some currency, providing actors with common places and clichés. However, assuming that the interpretive process is, therefore, a matter of straightforward acting out of separate ‘scripts’ would be naïve. The stories are certainly not automatically applicable in practice (compare Swidler 1986; compare Alexander 2004a: 568).

Just like practice stories, stories of governing contain settings, events and entities. But stories of governing are general images that actors have of governing and not the concrete ones that appear in practice stories. The settings of the municipality form the background of governing. Like settings in practice stories, they have time and space as their relevant dimensions. The setting that actors will probably most often refer to is 'the municipality' itself. But the meaning of the municipality differs from story to story (see *Section 2.4*). Concrete settings are the spaces where, and the times that, issues are made sense of. They can be the town hall building or the territory of the town or city. They can be situated yesterday or in the year 2004. Events and acts are what happens, and what is done during the interpretive process. 'Having a debate' and 'voting' are examples of events and acts. Entities in stories of governing are those human and non-human 'things' that are involved in the sense making. A neighborhood resident, a party leader, but also a regulation or a policy all can be entities. Again, there are some entities that are treated as active and others that are not. Actors might have a more active role as storyteller, or a more passive one as audience, or both. Even though they are changing themselves, the stories of governing together offer a limited range of settings, events and entities. In *Section 2.4* I elaborate on stories of governing, presenting three of them.

Action, Ambiguity and Hidden Meanings

The meaning(s) of an issue is(are) directed by the way practice stories recount what is going on. Selecting elements of reality and ordering them in a way that enables actors to grasp what is going on is what those telling practice stories are doing. Without stories actors would not be able to see what is going on. It is of crucial importance to understand that storytelling is an act that always has the potential to interfere with present and future action, even if the focus of the storytelling is located in what happened a long time ago. The new practice stories or new versions of known practice stories that actors come up with do not just give a new or altered account of what happened at moment X because actors found new facts concerning the matter or because they changed their minds. No, actors will try to give an account that better suits the meaning of what happened at moment X in the light of what happened *after* moment X. As we all know: Hi*story* is a view of the past from the present moment. This brings us to the consequences of the meaning of what has happened to actors making sense of it now. If what happened is judged as something relevant now, it, in that way, becomes part of what is (still) happening. This connects a story to action that actors are about to undertake.

A practice story, as we saw in Stone's story – things were bad, got worse and now we have to act –, often indicates some kind of mismatch between what is going on and what should be going on. This is what problem-setting is about. Different practice stories construct different problems (Rein and Schön 1993: 211-212), although they do not have to lead to different lines of action (Schön and Rein 1994: 35). Before an issue becomes relevant, actors might already have had a problem and a solution to which they want to fit the issue. Moreover, whether a specific issue is considered a problem at all also depends on the story in which it is placed (Hajer 1993: 44). As a reconstruction of the reality of the issue, a practice story draws attention to certain settings, events or entities. A practice story might also indicate the necessity of making a normative leap from what *is* going on to what *ought to be* going on (Rein and Schön 1977). Schön has even argued that stories might make the normative leap seem 'graceful, compelling, even obvious' (Schön 1994[1979]: 147).

That practice stories are action-directed and normative is not a triviality (Wagenaar 1997; Abma 1999: 9-11). They are not just meant to tell what happened in a coherent fashion, but most of all they are to lead actors to certain ways of dealing with it, in the form of solutions to problems. They are not just models *of* reality, but also models *for* reality (Geertz 1993[1973]: 93). Actors in practice are often less interested in the accurate truths than in plausible stories that give the opportunity to act, and to solve certain problems that they encounter (Weick 1995: 55-61; Orr 1996). A story will help the actors to get from a state of ambiguity to a state of (or a degree of) certainty. However, it cannot be expected that *what to do* always flows 'gracefully, compellingly, even obviously' from the stories actors propose, as Schön expected it to work. Of course there are ideas about future collective action embedded in even the most vague practice story, but treating stories as part of semi-automatic sense making skips the possibility of ambiguity and the use of negotiation in the interpretive process itself. It ignores the way in which sense making in practice may be more capricious. Stories in general can 'carry a load of ambiguity and therefore leave openings for negotiation of meaning' (Czarniawska 1998: 3; compare Abma 1999: 11).

The practice stories that actors come up with at the beginning of the interpretive process might give answers to the sense-making questions that are ambiguous because the actors who tell them are not confident about their ideas of what is going on. In addition, they may want to leave space for negotiation later on. Thus, stories might be 'crystallizing only as the drama unfolds' (Alexander 2004b: 91). Storytellers, most of the time, need their audience, especially since the members of the audience often have their own story to tell in return. But if the members of the audience tell their practice story in return, they become the storytellers telling a story to an audience and so on. Of importance is to see that the way actors present what is going on does not have to be identical to what they believe is going on. Storytellers may, for instance, strategically present a situation to be more damaging than they believe it is, in order to anticipate negotiation with actors who might argue that there is no problem at all. Stories that represent decisions towards the end of the interpretive process might be ambiguous because they have to accommodate the meanings different audiences and storytellers want to find in them. Finally, some accounts of what is going on will be - strategically or not – hidden from the public. *Hidden meanings* are those interpretations of reality that are downplayed or ignored in the interpretive process. They can be part of whole stories and they can be just lost fragments of stories. The hidden meanings of what is going on might be known to some of the storytellers, but they might also be hidden from them. Hidden meanings show how the image actors create of reality always has implications for other possible view of reality. They 'reveal a darker side' (Boje 1995: 997) as they help us to understand that making visible goes hand-in-hand with leaving out. The stories that become dominant or canonical tend to make us forget that, at some point in time, alternative views were around.

All the performances of storytelling together create a context filled with interrelated stories. Looking at storytelling in organizations, Boje (1991) named such a context 'a storytelling organization.' If we would look at the *storytelling municipality*, stories of governing offer actors a language and ideas to give meaning to governing as such. They provide ideas about the way governmental bodies relate to problems and the way they can (help to) solve them. In this way the problem and the problem solver become entangled. A simple story then becomes increasingly complicated. A second story Stone gave, the *story of helplessness and control*, can be used to illustrate this (Stone

2002[1988]: 142): 'The situation is bad. We have always believed that the situation was out of our control, something we had to accept but could not influence. Now, however, let me show you that in fact we can control things.' What becomes clear when we compare this story to Stone's first story – things were bad, got worse and now we have to act – is that there is a 'we' that comes to 'control things.' What counts for practice stories clearly also counts for stories of governing: they can be both descriptions of a reality that has taken place or is taking place and descriptions that can serve to model reality for future action. In the next section it will become clear how stories of governing do this.

2.4 Three Stories of Governing

The previous sections dealt with sense making and storytelling in general terms. This research, however, has an interest in governing and, with this, in the particular content of stories of governing. This is why the final section of this chapter is devoted to constructing some stories of governing that can be found in municipalities. The theoretical starting point of the reasoning is that these stories are closely related to the concept of a municipality itself. That is where I will start.

Now, what is a municipality? The concept of municipality – *gemeente* - is an ambiguous one in Dutch. It can refer to something that consists of a territory and its inhabitants, as well as to the local authority of this territory.[22] Defining local authorities and local government involves a similar dilemma as defining municipalities. This is, however, hardly a dilemma unique to the Dutch context, let alone for those who want to adopt universal definitions (Cole and Boyne 1995). It is possible to redefine municipalities, local authorities and local government according to the changes throughout time, calling the present state 'local governance' (John 2001: 1-24). This can aid in demonstrating that governing is no longer conducted from one central point. The vast literature on governance (Fenger and Bekkers 2007) can help to explain in what way and to what extent new governing practices have emerged. The concept of governance does not, however, necessarily bring about conceptual clarity since governance itself is a concept that has been used to describe a variety of empirical developments, as well as changing normative demands. Indeed, governance has also been used to refer to a more general theoretical perspective (Rhodes 1996; Pierre and Peters 2000: 14-27; Bevir and Rhodes 2004: 132-135).[23] The stories of governing presented below and the historical changes in them reflect several developments and demands, but with this current research I have not explicitly tried to further 'promote' governance as a theoretical perspective (Hajer and Wagenaar 2003b: 6).

In the empirical chapters of this study the choice has been made, where possible, to use the concept of 'local authority' rather than municipality, when I want to refer exclusively to a group of actors who belong to the formal political-bureaucratic organization. Local authority in these chapters refers to the municipal council, the board of mayor and aldermen, and the local bureaucracy. These actors and their acts of governing formed the starting point of my research. However, even among these actors themselves it should not be too hard to find disagreement about what a municipality is and does. This idea brings us back to the notion of culture-as-a-process as described at the end of the first chapter of this study (*Chapter 1*, *Section 1.3*). Actors can be united in the abstract concept of a municipality through their recognition of relevant issues, without an agreement on whether these issues should be relevant, or whether they should be negatively or positively valued.

It is no coincidence that the municipality concept seems ill-defined. 'It' means various things to various people at various times and in various contexts, and perhaps various things at the same time to the same people in one context. Municipalities are social constructs that can be examined from different angles, offering the possibility to make different images of them. These images find their way into the actions people undertake. Talking about local governance in academic circles and agreeing, for instance, that relationships are more horizontal than they used to be does not prevent more hierarchical images of municipality from informing the actual act of governing. Various ways of defining the municipality are possible, and it is precisely these boundaries that are often part of negotiation in the interpretive process.

Images of Municipalities

Ringeling (1998; compare Ringeling 2001; 2004) gave four images of Dutch municipalities.[24] The first image is that of the municipality as a company. The delivery of services and products is central to the municipality. Important values are centralization, uniformity, policy integration, effectiveness and efficiency. A second image of the municipality is that of an authoritarian organization. In this view the municipality is above all the authority and there is a distance between those who govern and those who are governed. The third image is that of the municipality as a political institution. After gaining legitimacy through elections, actors in politics decide on what is good for the people. A final image is that of the municipality as a local community. Here, governing is done by many people. In defense of this last image, Derksen (1992: 1-3) said that a municipality should be seen in the first place as 'a democratic platform for the local community.' A municipality, in his view, cannot do without a community and those who are part of the local authorities should be open to the wishes of the local community. At the same time, looking at the municipality as a community of people nowadays means questioning the direct relationship between a certain municipality and a certain territory. Derksen (1992: 1-2) has noted that, as a result of their mobility, citizens belong to communities that are not as much territorially bound as they used to be (VNG 2006b: 14).

It is possible to maintain that a municipality *is* a variety of things at different times and in different places. This idea, however, ignores the tension and conflict between different views of a municipality that can arise in practical situations. Some images are acted out while others are not, even if it is just for the moment. Moreover, as was argued in the first section of this chapter, the issues that actors are confronted with do not have a clear meaning by themselves. They obtain their meaning partly with the help of images of the municipality. The images of a municipality, if we conceive of them as stories about the municipality, contain different settings, events and entities that play a part in the municipalities. In other words, constant interpretation and reinterpretation of both the issues at stake and the relationship between those issues and the municipality can be expected in practice. Different images or stories can be part of academic debate as much as they can be part of debate in practice. In this study the interest is not so much in these debates themselves, but rather the way actors use stories of governing to make sense of the issues they are confronted with.[25]

What is important here is that in the act of governing itself actors can be expected to invoke different stories about what a municipality is. Actors in municipalities will use these different stories to give meaning to the specific issues they encounter. Although some actors might use a certain story of governing more frequently than another because of their membership in a particular group, they may also differ in their use of stories from situation to situation. This is also because actors tend to be members of different groups at the same time (compare van Twist and Termeer 1991: 23-24; compare Veenswijk 1995: 68). Moreover, some actors might not be aware of the content of stories of governing that other actors use. If we accept the challenge to look at the municipality as impossible to pin down as just one entity (in line with the ideas in *Chapter 1*, *Section 1.3*), we are more able to become aware of the ambiguous shapes it might be given in practice.

Three Stories

For the study of sense making in municipalities at least three stories of governing can be identified: a consensus, a political and a managerial story of governing. In this research these stories have been constructed with a combination of deduction and induction. In *Chapter 3* (*Section 3.4*) the way the stories of governing have been constructed is elaborated on. Theoretically, the stories have been inspired primarily by the four images of municipalities as outlined by Ringeling (1998; compare Ringeling 2001; 2004) – company, authoritarian organization, political institute, local community. They also adopt three images of Dutch governing culture that were described in *Chapter 1*: the culture of the three C's – consultation, compromise and consensus - the politicized culture, and the cult(ure) of decisiveness.

In the consensus story, governing obtains meanings of consensus, it involves finding consensus together with the members of a local political community. This may or may not be interpreted as something that extends beyond the boundaries of the formal political-administrative organization. The municipality as a community and the three C's are the basis of this story. In a political story governing obtains the meaning of fighting for, and against, political visions on a battlefield. In this story the local authority may see itself as the guardian of the public interest. This allows it to conceive of citizens as primarily voters and servants. In this way both the municipality as a political institution, and as an authoritarian organization, become associated with the idea of a political culture in which everything is political. In the managerial story governing obtains the meaning of being goal-directed and making tangible, measurable products that the public can consume. The municipality as a company and the cult of no-nonsense decisiveness are joined in this story. Actors are expected to use these three stories of governing in a struggle over a particular issue that takes place in the interpretive process. However, as previously mentioned, even though fighting over meaning takes place within the boundaries of an interpretive process, the boundaries of the process - and thus the meaning of governing and the municipality – can be directly or indirectly the object of the struggle as well. The result of such struggles might be that one or two of the stories dominate other(s) during a short or long period.

The Consensus Story

Governing in the consensus story obtains the meaning of looking for consensus. If actors encounter an issue that is commonly accepted as relevant, they will look for a practice story that corresponds to as many of the ways of looking as can be found among those who participate in the interpretive process. This story follows the description of Dutch governing culture as a culture of the three C's: consultation, compromise, consensus (Hendriks and Toonen 1998a: 1). Governing in the Netherlands is done in 'collegiate bodies that, more or less, attempt to reach decisions on the basis of equality' (Tops 2001: 88). In this story the municipality is a *community*. Actors perceive other actors as colleagues. Normative and descriptive elements of the integration perspective in organizational culture studies (Martin 2002) are in line with this story. Organizing, in this perspective, goes hand-in- hand with focusing on and creating consensus on values, norms, etc. The culture of accommodation among the elite members in Dutch politics, as Lijphart (1975[1968]) described, is an image that is in accordance with the idea of an effort to reach consensus at all times. However, not all seven of Lijphart's rules necessarily belong in this story.

Of importance in the interpretive process is the common ground that is shared in the practice stories available. In other words, actors are looking for a practice story that they can agree upon. Moreover, in the end the process towards consensus might be more important than the content. The adoption of this story has important consequences for the way those who govern go about their work. Negotiation is the central sense-making act (compare Bekkers and Lips 2001: 139).[26] During the interpretive process, reframing will be proposed in order to integrate initially incompatible stories. Various governing actors will have to be consulted to make sure the meanings given to issues have support. Effort will be made to de-politicize governing. Issues will typically be dealt with *backstage* - in what the Dutch call 'achterkamertjes'[27] - where negotiation can take place.[28] The adoption of this story has important consequences for the way those who govern go about their work. In the council meeting, for instance, what goes on before the meeting and during the breaks might be crucial to the meanings that are formed. Meanings proposed can be recognized by the fact that they unite the actors engaged in sense making. The setting in time and space is likely to increase (a longer time period and a bigger space) as a consequence of efforts to consult and come to a supported compromise. The interpretive process then becomes a slow-moving affair in which many actors are involved (compare Hendriks 1998). As stories of governing are both normative *and* descriptive, consensus might not so much expected in advance as it is being strived for. Nevertheless, looking for common ground might naturally lead to encountering it.

A crucial question that this story does not formulate a clear answer to is that of the boundaries of the community that should be involved in governing. Lijphart's (1975[1968]) classic image of governing in the Netherlands indicates that consensus is something that is aimed at and worked at within an *elite* community. Alternatively, following the image of the municipality as a *local* community, as Ringeling and Derksen (Derksen 1992; Ringeling 1998; 2004) defined it, would imply that citizens and other stakeholders are to be actively involved in the interpretive process. Governing in a local community should be done by many people (Ringeling 2004: 78). Especially the discovery of the gap between those who govern and those who are governed, an image constructed after the disastrous voter turnout during the municipal elections of 1990 would encourage a 'search for the lost citizen' (Hendriks and Tops 1999). As various authors have argued (Duyvendak and Krouwel 2001; Tops 2001: 89; Hendriks and Tops 2003), enlarging the setting to include citizens and stakeholders would fit well with a Dutch governing culture with three C's. In this version of the consensus story, what is called 'the local authority' is just one of the actors. The local authority is not seen as being in charge, although it could have the special role of safeguarding the process towards consensus. A municipality, in this version of the consensus story, cannot do without a community, and those who are part of the local authorities should be open to the wishes of the local community. These ideas are in line with some descriptive and normative elements of local governance (John 2001), like horizontal relationships and interdependency between actors inside and outside of local government. The citizen in this story can become an active co-producer or partner of the meaning of issues. Finally, in terms of the relation between local government and other governments, the consensus story would argue for an organic relationship in which the layers of government are interdependent (Toonen 1990). The municipalities *co-govern* a town or city more than they follow the orders coming from higher authorities.

The Political Story

Governing in the political story obtains the meanings of fighting for and against political visions. If actors – as a political group - encounter an issue they find relevant, they will try to persuade other groups about what is good and true in the matter, according to their practice story about it. On the one hand, this story is based on the idea of a politicized culture that was dominant at the beginning of the 1970s in the Netherlands (Daalder 1995) and has since become part of cultural life (Kickert 2003: 123). On the other hand, this story draws on the view of a municipality as a political *and* an authoritarian organization (compare Ringeling 1998; Ringeling 2004). In this story the municipality is a *battlefield*. On this battlefield you either win or lose. It is more or less impossible that all actors will gain in the process. The related question of importance is one of power: Who gets what, when and how? Normative and descriptive elements of the differentiation perspective in organizational culture studies (Martin 2002) are also in line with this story. Organizing in this perspective goes hand-in-hand with creating and focusing on diversity and conflict.

Of importance in the interpretive process are the differences in *content* between the available practice stories. Framing is the crucial sense-making act. Actors want to establish a certain reality to be accepted as *the* truth. Actors will often be looking for the front stage to make their view of issues known to the audience. Variety in views may be seen as a good thing, because it offers actors in the municipality the opportunity of choice. Processes are likely to be politicized. The settings of the story, in terms of time and space involved, might differ according to the degree to which polarization takes place. It should be clear that the political battles are not restricted to what goes on in the formal political institution – i.e., the municipal council. They may or may not involve many actors who are officially called politicians. Moreover, many would argue – also consistent with the observation of a move from 'government' to 'governance' - that power and politics do not only reside in the local authority.[29]

If processes are polarized they may turn into long lasting conflicts that involve many actors throughout a town or city. By contrast, political conflict may also turn the interpretive process into a fast conflict. Backstage bargaining might be used, but it will be done in order to form alliances that might advance one's own interests. Meanings proposed form an internally consistent, but one-sided view of reality. Some available practice stories might be hidden throughout the process, because actors might present another reality than the one they believe is true. Actors perceive other actors as adversaries or allies rather than as colleagues. When issues turn into personal vendettas or feuds and political crises appear, adversaries might even turn into enemies (Edelman 1988: 65-68). The interpretations that actors then support might be supported not for their content, but rather because they are opposite to those their enemies support. The bureaucratic organization and departments in it are expected to put forward their preferred meanings all of the time as well.

Ideas about the relationship between societal stakeholders – especially citizens - and the local authority can also be found in the political story. The political parties in the council represent opposing political groups in the town or city. These groups are seen as political subcultures. These groups are at war through the political parties in the council. But, as a result of the historically grown relationships in municipalities, the local authority forms its own subculture. This image of division in the community on the one hand, but on a clear elite subculture on the other, fits well with Lijphart's (1975[1968]) picture of the Netherlands up until 1968. Moreover, this image has been reconstructed at various times. The gap between the local authority and the citizens now obtains another meaning. From the point of view of the members of the local authority, the existence of a cultural divide between them and other parts of the municipality does not have to be seen as problematic. If other actors in the town or city do not agree with the meaning that the local authority gives to an issue, it is the consequence of a different value and interest pattern among these other actors. Whereas the local authority always has the public interest and values in mind, other actors only fight for their individual or group values and interests. Categorizing these citizens and groups with the Not-In-My-Backyard label enables the local authority to deal with protests (Tops 2001).

Seen in organizational terms, the top of the organization knows best, in this story, what to do and has the right to decide on meaning. It has the overview and the responsibility that others in the organization do not have. This concept of governing could be called elitist, paternalistic (Tops 2001: 88). The clearly hierarchical relationship between the local authorities and other actors in town can be seen as out of date in a network society (Hajer and Wagenaar 2003b) in which top-down steering is often resisted. That does not, however, mean that it is not an image local authorities have and use. If groups or individuals protest, the reason why they might be right in their protest is because the local authority has not made clear what is happening and what should be done. It is a matter of communication from the view of the public interest to particular views. The local authority does not have to give issues a different meaning; it has to 'translate' the meaning it gives in a better way from one subculture to another. From the point of view of the local authority, governing thus involves making authoritative decisions on political –interest, value – conflicts that are communicated in a transparent way.

It can be said the political fight goes in various directions. There is a struggle over the meaning of issues within the local authority. This can, for instance, be a fight between political parties in the council, between board and council, between politicians and civil servants, or between departments in the local bureaucracy. As the fight in the council represents the fights in the local society, it can be treated as a political fight between political subcultures that can be found in the town or city. There is also a fight between the local authority, who safeguards the public interest, and other actors, who are only involved to safeguard the practice stories that benefit them as a group or individual. Finally, the relationship between the local authority and other authorities – who consider themselves 'higher authorities' - is also adversarial by nature. Both the image of the municipality as a political institution and the image of the municipality as an authoritative organization (compare Ringeling 1998; Ringeling 2004) come together in this political story. Citizens are likely to be seen as voters or servants, although they also might become strategic allies. Municipal elections are a sort of carnival during which the hierarchy between those who govern and those who are governed, between the staff and the employees of the organization, is turned upside down for a very short while. For a moment the subcultures within the town or city are made as visible as possible. But as this takes place only once every four years, the local authority can often rely on the image of servant alone. Recent changes at the national level in the representation of electoral power through the use of surveys and internet might, in the end, have consequences for this story, should it become a regular feature at the local level.

The Managerial Story

Governing in the managerial story obtains the meaning of being goal-directed and making tangible products. If actors encounter an issue that is commonly accepted as relevant, they will research it, take decisions on the basis of facts and implement these. This story follows the description of the municipality as *an enterprise* or a company that makes products and delivers services (Ringeling 1998; 2001; 2004), and the cult(ure) of decisiveness that Daalder saw at the beginning of the 1980s (Daalder 1995: 96-100). More than visions, actors make plans. Not three C's, but three E's are of importance in this story: *economy*, *effectiveness* and *efficiency* (Hendriks and Tops 2003: 312; Kickert 2003: 125). The New Public Management thinking as it was adopted first in municipalities, like Tilburg in the 1980s (Hendriks and Tops 1999; 2003), is a clear indication of the historical rise of this story in Dutch municipalities. By the way, New Public Management thinking has also been connected to governance (Rhodes 1996: 655; Fenger and Bekkers 2007).[30] No-nonsense decisiveness makes for a business-like pragmatism.[31] Others might refer to this way of doing as technocracy (Daalder 1995: 99-100). The idea that government could be run like a business is central in this story.

Of importance in the interpretive process is not the consensus on or the content of what is going on, but the *control* over it. The act of sense making central to this story is enactment. The meanings of issues are seen as already established or to be established through a-political techniques. Politics should be clear and transparent. Although the Political Story also argues for clear framing of the meaning of issues, in this story it is not important what final meanings are reached, as long as they *are* reached, decided upon and that their implementation is feasible. Next to a focus on 'getting things done,' there is a clear *forensic* side to this story (cf. Noordegraaf 2002). The objective principles of economy and calculation as a means to de-politicize matters especially come into play (Lijphart 1975[1968]). Issues in the municipality are likely to be treated as entities with properties that can be factually described. Perhaps they can even be mathematically measured and compared. Specialists, who promise a factual ('as it really is,' based on fact-finding) view of what is going on, might have to be consulted. As decisions are to be reached through technique, it is important to find a scientific technique that will help to find, describe or measure, and finally compare the facts that matter. Moreover, once found, the facts will be asked to 'speak for themselves' (compare Stone 2002[1988]: 305-323). Once the facts are accepted, they might also be referred to with neutral sounding concepts such as 'information' (Stone 2002[1988]: 28-29) or 'knowledge.'

Both time and space are limited in this story, even though research might cost some time and might involve people from outside the small circle of actors in the local authority. In this way the story avoids the dangers of the consensus story and the political story. The consensus story could lead to an endless process in order to reach consensus (Hendriks 2001), the political story could lead to stalemates if frames are conflicting and the parties involved don't find a way out (Schön and Rein 1994: 3-9). By contrast, according to the political story, actors would always present reality from a political point of view; this problem is a shortcut with the help of supposedly neutral techniques. Voting in the council and during the elections could be considered a rough technique to establish what should be done. After these rough differences are made, the presented programs can be put into action. Citizens get the role of clients of the municipal enterprise. In newer forms of public management citizens become the source of factual information as well, which creates the possibility of leaving out the political institution of the council in the act of governing (Hendriks and Tops 2003). Overall, if citizens are more actively involved, the reason for this is, basically, that dealing with the citizens from an earlier point in the process onwards might be more effective and efficient in terms of support for final solutions. Finally, in its relation to other governments, the question that plays an important role is that of scale. The idea is that there is a certain scale on which services and products are delivered most efficiently to clients, which leads to a policy of amalgamation of small municipalities (Derksen and Schaap 2004: 213).

A Sensitizing Framework

Two questions could be asked at the end of this section. The first is whether these three stories of governing are the only ones that might matter. The answer to this question is 'no.' But, although others have come up with other images of governing and municipalities (e.g. Commissie Toekomst Lokaal Bestuur 2006), these three stories seem to present important ways of making sense that could be encountered in municipalities. They also reflect important tensions in municipalities. As opposed to *ways of life* in Cultural Theory (Thompson, et al. 1990, see Section 1.2) that are based primarily upon a logical division with two universal dimensions, stories of governing are changing historical constructs (compare concept of 'traditions' in Bevir and Rhodes 2003; Rhodes 2007: 1250). I have argued that Ringeling's images of municipalities as authoritarian and political institutions can be seen as one, because of the historical development of a subculture of government. I have to admit, however, that I did rule out one possible story of governing that could well have some added value, now and then. This story of governing would treat the world as utterly fragmented. The world as totally fragmented is one in which consensus has become impossible, subcultures appear and disappear without forming any sort of power basis, and control is totally lost. In this world, what happens in society is not well predicted or known (compare van Gunsteren 1994). With it the rules of the game that make up the interpretive process are no longer clear. In organizational culture studies this situation fits with a fragmentation perspective (Martin 2002). Such a fragmented world, which is also visible in the fatalist way of life in Cultural Theory (although in that world there are many rules), may be a more realistic view of the world.[32] Nevertheless, I will not expect this to be a story that plays a big role in the sense making itself. Even if such a world is part of the experience of actors, they will probably try to formulate an answer to the task of living with insecurities by using one of the stories or combining them. Therefore, for now, this fragmentation story will not be given a prominent place.

The second question is whether it is possible to reconstruct these stories from a messy practice and still do justice to the experiences actors involved. The implication of the social constructivist ideas outlined at the end of *Chapter 1* lead me to expect that actors are aware and capable of using more than one of the stories of governing. Actors, from their position or their specific standpoint, at a certain moment in time have a preference for seeing the world of governing in one way or another. But they will be more or less familiar with all three stories and be able to use them to some extent. Actors might also treat different stories as phases in a process that has a clear beginning, middle and end. First actors would give a political vision of what is going on, then they would negotiate its meaning, and only in the last stage would they turn these meanings into action.

As I said in *Section 2.2,* I do not expect the interpretive process to be well structured at all times. The interpretive process is likely to be dynamic. The phases - *initial* meaning making, *struggle* over meaning and *final* meaning making - that I have indicated are the reconstructions that are needed to make some of the interpretive process open to research, but the actual form of the process is up for grabs. It might be hard to indicate initial meanings, a struggle that follows might be without conflicts and there may be no clear final meanings decided upon at all. Even if the institutional set-up that actors take into account does help to pre-structure some of the sense making, these institutional structures are multi-interpretable themselves. Elements from all three stories can be found in the institutional set-up. In addition, the institutional set-up does not force actors to make sense in one way. What can be said in advance, however, is that it is unlikely that in practice only one of the stories will be in use. The cultures of municipalities and the processes in them probably show more variety than that. Nevertheless, one can expect actors to strongly advocate the use of one story over another in specific cases. The result can be that in interpretive processes one or two stories of governing dominate the other(s).

To Conclude

This has been a theoretical chapter about the way actors give meaning to issues they are confronted with. The argument in this chapter has been that when actors in municipalities are confronted with issues, they ask themselves two sense-making questions: *What has happened?* and *What should we do?* They engage in an interpretive process in order to formulate answers to these questions. Through the acts of framing, negotiating and enacting they construct the realities they are faced with. The order in which these acts take place is not a definite one, nor does the interpretive process clearly stop or begin. In addition, it should be clear that the interpretive process is symbolic. The sense-making acts can also be seen in more practical terms as acts of storytelling.

Stories consist of settings, events and entities. Stories attribute meanings, enabling actors to decide what is going on and what should be done. They can contain ambiguity while at the same time they are meant to trigger action. There are two kinds of stories. Practice stories are the particular accounts of what is going on and what should be done. Stories of governing are general stories about the way actors in municipalities deal with issues. Three stories of governing were identified: a consensus, a political and a managerial story of governing. Some interpretations of what is going on might, however, remain hidden from the public.

The concepts and ideas put forward in this chapter make the study of culture-as-a-process possible. They allow for culture to be more than a thing that is stable and that people agree upon. They allow us to see in what way meanings can emerge during processes. To find out about the way actors in municipalities create meanings that then offer the possibility to act as a collective, it is necessary to analyze actual cases. Before moving on to some empirical cases, however, the next chapters will describe the way this empirical research has been designed and executed, and will give a picture of the Dutch municipality as it can be found in the literature.

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[1] I want to thank Frans-Bauke van der Meer for the conversations I had with him about Weick's work.

[2] It also has a lot in common with theoretical ideas of some social constructivists using discourse analysis (Laclau and Mouffe 1990; Phillips and Jørgensen 2002: 24-59).

[3] The formulation Blumer uses is different in the sense that he talks about humans and persons, and uses the singular form of those in the second and the third premise. He also talks about an interpretative process, and not about an interpretive process.

[4] Comparable to what Blumer called things.

[5] As political scientists would have it, some issues are organized in and others are organized out.

[6] Interpreting and sense making will be treated as synonyms in this text. Interpretation can be used to refer to the act of sense making here as well, although I do agree with Weick (1995: 6-8) that these terms can very well be separated to make a point about sense making as more inclusive.

[7] Weick (2003: 186) formulated two very similar questions talking about enactment: What's the story? What now? He used the term story (that I will employ as well) and stressed the way in which action itself, in the form of enactment, gives the answer (and I will get to that later as well).

[8] Much more can be said about the notion of practice, as can be seen in the overview Wagenaar and Cook (2003) gave. With practice situations here I want to point mostly at the action-orientation of situations that are encountered in the field. The same counts for practice stories later on.

[9] Most of the time the two basic questions actors deal with on a daily basis seem not that hard to answer, and sense making will have a more taken-for-granted character and therefore be harder to trace. It might also be of interest to just a small group of actors. Rather often, however, actors have to deal with events in a more fundamental way, because obvious answers do not seem to work or are not agreed upon. 'Fundamental' does not mean to say that tacit processes cannot be important. They just get less explicit attention. Furthermore, I would like to suggest that the wider relevance of this research is that if we look at sense making in situations where the usual is suspended, we can learn much about the interpretive process in general (compare Weick 1985: 386). This is not to say that interpretive processes

that do not become problematic are not important to study. When the obvious answers no longer work and an issue is generally seen as relevant, actors show us that issues do not have a meaning all by themselves. In that case the meaning of an issue has to be established explicitly before the answer to the second question can take form.

[10] The relevance of an issue might be stated in the initial efforts of sense making themselves.

[11] Schön and Rein (1994) talked about rhetorically framing. This is the kind of framing I am pointing at here. The idea of a distinction between rhetorical and action frames has not made clear sense to me. What they call an action frame is hardly distinguishable from a rhetorical frame.

[12] Reframing, as Schön (1994[1979]) originally put it, is quite a strict concept. He wanted to look at instances where a totally new way of looking at an issue 'really' went beyond the views of reality already available. Miller (1985) already criticized Schön's belief in the possibility of moving beyond the problems as originally framed. My more modest view of reframing points at the effort to fuse or integrate two versions of reality that were originally experienced as opposing in one or more ways and after the reframing no longer does that.

[13] Macintyre, focusing mostly on the story of individual lives, has a more realist idea of storytelling than I have, stressing the narrative form of reality, pointing at the realness of 'death' as the end of a life (Macintyre 1985[1981]: 207). On the differences between a constructivist and a realist stance towards stories see Fay (1996: 178-198). The difference, however, does not make the point Macintyre makes here less relevant for my discussion here.

[14] Riessman says that events become meaningful because of their placement in a narrative. As I take events to be sorts of issues, and narratives to be a general indication for stories, Riessman's idea is more or less similar.

[15] I am aware that Aristotle offers much more, but I have not made use of that here.

[16] Some make a difference between narratives and stories, here I do not.

[17] Burke formulated five elements of dramatism, Czarniaskwa selected three of them to fit organizational theory. Burke would call them scene, agent and act. Czarniawska calls them scene, actor and action. These three are also the basic ones I selected to talk about stories and they are reflected in interpretive processes and stories of governing. The third one story element I defined more broadly, to be able to add entities that do not act per se or are the means through which acting takes place. At other moments Czarniawska (1998: 2) gave other basic elements of narratives, following narrative theory.

[18] Although Forester uses this definition to talk about practice stories, I use it to refer to both the accounts found in practice that I call practice stories and the more general stories of governing. Both kinds of stories will be presented later on.

[19] As Noordegraaf (2000: 3) puts it: the problem is, what is the problem?

[20] The complexity is a lot bigger. Imagine, for instance, that we either add or do not add that Jan threw the brick 500 meters from the Central Square.

[21] A part of the answer to the question 'what has happened before?' or 'what will happen?' might be yet another particular account.

[22] Local authority is also referred to as *gemeentebestuur*. Municipalities, in the sense of territory (and inhabitants), are also referred to as towns or cities. A third connotation of a *gemeente* is that of a religious group, either in general or in a town.

[23] The diversity that the concept of governance allows for at the same time offers the theoretical possibility to 'see' more of what is going on in the act of governing. In other words, freeing oneself - as a practitioner or researcher - from the narrow idea of steering as mainly

an affair of governments makes it possible to go beyond restrictive and simplified ideas about the nature of steering. This does not, however, mean that practitioners only use ideas that form part of a new way of thinking and doing, as they might well hold on to their previous conceptions.

[24] Compare the use of metaphors in Morgan's Images of Organization (Morgan 1997[1986]).

[25] In this study I will refer not to municipalities as much as I will refer to the act of governing, preferring the concept *stories of governing* over *stories of municipalities*.

[26] Bekkers and Lips (2001) called this an open policy style, which they compared with a closed policy style (ibid 2001: 138-139). In the second instance, the definition and the solution of a problem are monopolized. Steering takes the form of control. A combination of versions of both my political and managerial stories of governing would make for such a closed policy style.

[27] Literally 'backrooms,' They stand for spaces that give those who govern the opportunity to come to compromises without the followers or critics.

[28] Because of the backstage character of the consensus story, the way compromises are forged might not be known to those who do not yet belong to a governing in-crowd. An anecdote from my fieldwork could be considered to show the way this story applies to local politics. The leader of a political party called a civil servant with a background in politics a couple of weeks before the elections. Because he was new to the job he asked the civil servant to give him some advice about the elections. As he had planned to go on holiday during the two weeks after the elections, he was wondering whether the negotiations for the new coalition would have already started before he got back. The civil servant responded by saying that the negotiations had probably all ready started before the political leader picked up the phone to call him. As the civil servant told me this, there was silence for a little while. This anecdote shows that sense making according to a consensus story might go on at unexpected moments and in probably hard-to-find settings for those who do not belong to the in-crowd.

[29] Institutionalized politics is just one form of politics and so many things have become 'political,' from dress to life style.

[30] Although it is also possible to see New Public Management in contrast to governance, where governance is meant to repair 'the failures of the NPM movement' (Fenger and Bekkers 2007: 27). The managerial story I put forward is not synonym to New Public Management.

[31] That is also part of New Public Management (Hendriks and Tops 1999).

[32] Postmodern perspectives (e.g., Van Twist 1995) also stress this fragmentation.

3 On Doing Research

> Story telling, to put the argument simply, is what we do
> with our research material and what informants do with us.
>
> Riessman (1993: 1)

3.1 Crafting a Design

This research started out with a general interest in culture in municipalities. As described in *Chapter 1,* various ways of looking at culture have been developed in the study of government. It has also become clear that in the study of municipalities it is rare to find culture research that combines an interpretive epistemology with a social-constructivist ontology. Such research would provide a valuable and original contribution to the field. The research question that was formulated for this current project indicates an interest in the way actors in practice make sense of the issues they consider relevant. *Chapter 2* focused on the way culture-as-a-process could be further conceptualized and it sketched stories about governing. This chapter will first show how interpretive epistemology was incorporated into a research design. Secondly, it will elaborate on the fieldwork, with regard to both the activities and position of the researcher. Finally, the analysis and write-up will be discussed.

Interpretation and Thick Description

To conduct this study an interpretive approach to doing research was adopted (Geertz 1993[1973]: chapter 1; Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006a: part 1). Although 'interpretive' is a very broad category - which might include what some have identified as 'interpretivism' or 'social constructivism' (see Schwandt 1998) – characterized by big differences within and fuzzy boundaries around it - this seems the best way to describe the general approach. Recent introductions to (e.g., Yanow 2000) and discussions on (see Gerring 2003; Finlayson 2004) interpretive approaches to doing research in the Political Science arena and in Public Administration will not be repeated here.

In this research the central premise is that human actors collectively make sense of or 'interpret' (two synonyms in this research) a world that has no meaning by itself. Research is aimed at finding out how actors do that. The approach used in this study 'focuses on meaning and meaning-making in specific situational contexts and on processes of sense-making more broadly; it is concerned with understanding the life-world of the actor in the situation(s) being studied; and it engages the role of language and other artifacts in constructing and communicating meaning and social relationships (Hatch and Yanow 2003: 70)'.

Since social science is a human sense-making effort as well, it necessarily generates interpretations of interpretations (Geertz 1993[1973]: 15). The belief in the social construction of meaning in a shared world leads interpretive researchers to think they will never be able to come up with a final interpretation.[1] As Yanow (2000: 5) puts it, 'we live in a social world characterized by the possibilities of multiple interpretations. In this world there are no "brute data" whose meaning is beyond dispute'. All knowledge in the social sciences is construed from some point of view (Brown 1976). Moreover, knowledge social scientists come up with help to construct the very world being described. Researchers should, however, keep in mind that the awareness of the lack of an ultimate foundation for knowledge of the social world does not have to lead to total relativism. It does not have to involve an 'anything-goes' attitude towards scientific practice. On the contrary, the acknowledgement of the social construction of reality asks social scientists to become more reflexive of and critical towards their own practice in order to understand how they themselves help to bring the 'facts' to life. It asks researchers to become conscious of the metaphors (e.g., culture, process, storytelling, stories) which they use to talk about reality. In other words, a healthy degree of relativism does not have to lead to rejecting the scientific enterprise as such. It is important, however, to properly understand what the practice of science is about (Fischer 2003).

As became clear during the literature study done for this research, sense-making processes in Dutch municipalities are very complex. Getting an *in-depth* understanding of what goes on in them became the specific aim of empirical research. This research design was obviously not aimed at representing all interpretive processes that take place in municipalities, let alone making valid claims about all municipalities in the Netherlands. In-depth understanding goes hand-in-hand with elaborate descriptions of the complex processes under study. This kind of description in interpretive research is often called *thick description* (Geertz 1993[1973]: chapter 1; Schwartz-Shea 2006: 101). The anthropologist Geertz put forward the idea of the study of other cultures as making thick descriptions in his 1973 book 'The Interpretation of Cultures'. The point Geertz makes is that if we observe and interpret social action we can give 'thin' descriptions, describing a single interpretation of an act, or 'thick' ones, describing many possible meanings of that act. Geertz borrowed the standard example as well as the concept 'thick description' from the philosopher Ryle, who talked about describing the act of rapidly contracting one's eyelids. This act can be seen as twitching, but it might also mean winking or even a parody of winking. The same act might result in one or more additional meanings that are totally different.

The background that a thick description provides will help us to understand many of the possible meanings of the acts. A thick description of the act that shows its various possible meanings goes further than the thin description (e.g., actor X rapidly contracted his eyelids). Geertz argued that acts become more understandable if we know more about the context in which they took place. In this study, stories help produce this context, offering some meanings and downplaying others. A thick description can thus be seen as a description of interpretive processes and the stories that are used and created to make sense in practice. Making a thick description in this research does not involve merely impressionistic work (Yanow 1996: 54; Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006b: 16) or a sole concern for what is unique. It aims at uncovering or reconstructing layers and variations of meaning. When doing thick description one should not aim to find *the* meaning the world has to actors in it, but rather the various meanings it has, and how this works out in concrete situations. In this way, the approach used for this research differs from approaches like those of Schein (1991, see also Chapter 1, Section 1.2) that aim to uncover the ultimate meaning the world has for members of a group. Putting actors in practice up front, this approach also differs from those studies that are primarily guided by theory (compare Klok, et al. 1996: 238). Interpretive research primarily tries to capture and elucidate social life (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2006: 329).

Ethnographic Fieldwork

An ethnographic way of doing fieldwork was chosen, to provide thick descriptions of processes. Although the concept 'ethnography' is often used to refer to the written result of fieldwork (Van Maanen 1988), ethnographic fieldwork refers to a way of gathering – what social constructivists prefer to call *generating* - data. Others have referred to more or less the same activity using the concept *participant observation* or simply *fieldwork* (Spradley 1980). Ethnographic fieldwork originates in anthropology, as the study of the culture of a people, but has been used in sociology for a long time as well (Van Maanen 1988: 19-21). In addition, it has been used frequently in organizational science (Bate 1997). In organizational science Kunda (1992), for instance, did ethnographic research to find out how culture was used as a tool for normative control in a high-tech corporation. Orr (1990; 1996) studied service technicians who were trying to deal with photocopy machines and the clients operating them. On the border between organizational science and policy analysis, Yanow (1996) was an observer and participant in a community center. Researchers in Dutch Public Administration have also been using ethnographic fieldwork or something similar. Frissen (1989), whose ideas are dealt with in the first chapter of this study, studied a part of a bureaucratic organization. Noordegraaf (2000; 2007) followed public managers while they were working, studying their 'meaning-making in action'. Finally, new advocates of ethnography – and interpretive research as such - appeared not too long ago in the context of studying British governance and elites (Rhodes 2002; Bevir and Rhodes 2003; Rhodes, et al. 2007).

Ethnographic fieldwork is the first step in 'learning from people' (Spradley 1980: 3). The basic idea behind ethnographic fieldwork is that in order to come to some sort of understanding of the way people make sense, a researcher should spend a fair amount of time with the actors 'in the field.' In the field the interpretive researcher adopts the attitude of a student who wants to learn about the world he or she visits (cf. Spradley 1980: 3-5). This involves trying to look for the 'native's point of view.' This does not have to mean embracing a naïve naturalism that would invoke the idea that there is one genuine reality of the native that can be accessed directly (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995[1983]: 10-11). Ethnographic fieldwork is different from other strategies, because '[t]he most important element of [ethnographic] fieldwork is *being there'* (Fetterman 1998: 9, italics added). *Being there* (see also Rhodes, et al. 2007: 3-4)[2] means being physically present in the field.[3] If the field of interest offers this possibility, *being there* might open doors to all kinds of data that are hard to get. In a municipality, for instance, it involves unplanned casual conversations with informants over lunch or at the photocopy machine. There is also the possibility of observing meetings that are closed to the general public and retrieving informal documents that are present in the field, like leaflets or handwritten speeches. In addition, ethnographic fieldwork offers the possibility of personally experiencing events that take place and processes that are unfolding. When studying processes that are still developing or, for which meanings are still debated, the advantage of being in the field is that the researcher can see how meaning is established *along the way*. In a sense, 'doing ethnographic field-work' is just a posh way of saying 'go and see for yourself.' It also offers the possibility of getting to know the actors in the field better as well as the context in which they do whatever it is they are doing.

An additional feature of ethnography is the matter of duration. Being in the field for a long time, and the repetition that comes with it, enables the researcher's understanding to develop. In a way the researcher becomes socialized or enculturated. He or she develops common sense knowledge about stories and the elements in them. It might take awhile before the researcher is able to create an understanding of the world of the natives and the processes that are caught up in it. Whereas a common rule of thumb in qualitative research is that you know when you have gathered enough data when you hear the same thing twice,[4] I would argue that hearing the same things over and over again is an important thing to notice about the field, *not* about the research. 'Being there' offers an elaborate form of what is often referred to as *triangulation* (Robson 2002[1993]: 174; Schwartz-Shea 2006: 102-103): generating data with the help of multiple methods. Ethnographic fieldwork, to sum it all up, is a way of getting close to the many meanings actors in the field use to make sense of what is going on in their world.

Selection of Municipalities and Cases

Since the interpretive approach in general, and the ethnographic way of gathering data in particular, is very intensive, only a small number of interpretive processes could be studied. The processes themselves could be treated as separate cases (Stake 2000). The overview of the literature regarding culture (*Section 1.2*) did not offer a clear indication of how sense making would work similarly or differently in the municipalities or cases. Therefore, the most important principle for selecting municipalities and cases became the need to maximize the ability to learn (cf. Stake 2000: 446-447) from the cases in this research. Good access to a variety of data over a longer period was important. In the first instance, a six-month stay in three medium-sized municipalities, studying three cases in each of them, seemed possible. During the research, however, it became apparent that the workload in the field and accompanying analyses made just two municipalities, studying two cases, a more realistic design.

For the selection of municipalities, following the principle of the ability to learn, three practical criteria were used. The first criterion was the size of the towns in which I would do research. The reason for using this criterion was the idea that smaller towns would have too few things going on to study intensely over a longer period; bigger ones would have too much going on to find issues that were of relevance to a variety of actors over a longer period. Towns were selected, therefore, that had at least 15,000, but no more than 40,000 inhabitants. The second criterion was the quality of the connection by public transport between my hometown and the town under study, which could influence my ability to attend meetings and do interviews late at night or early in the morning. These first two criteria helped me to make a shortlist of 35 municipalities.

The final criterion was the accessibility of the local authorities that could host me during the research. A local authority that would open its gates for me would enable me to study in the ethnographic way described earlier in this chapter. More concretely that meant the need to, at least in principle, have access to all meetings, documents and actors and have some assistance in finding my way into the political and bureaucratic organizations. Severe restrictions could seriously endanger the possibility of generating data in general and finding out more specifically about interpretations of reality that are more or less hidden.[5]

The actual access to the two municipalities studied was as practical as the criteria that put them on the shortlist. In Heart-less Town (see *Section 5.1,* cases in *Chapter 5* and *6*), I was present at a meeting in which my research center at the Erasmus University in Rotterdam was asked to contribute. During a chat at the end of the conference an alderman showed interest in my research plans. Soon after this an agreement was made. One of my academic supervisors knew the mayor of another municipality on the shortlist. This made it easier to set up a meeting with the mayor and the Chief Executive Officer and elaborate on my wish to do research in Free City (see *Section 7.1,* cases in *Chapter 7* and *8*). These key actors from the two municipalities proved willing to support such a study. Although the criteria for selecting municipalities were not chosen in order to find municipalities that are representative of a wide range of municipalities, it is interesting to keep in mind that the two municipalities do not seem all that unique if we look, for example, at the size of the towns. With around 25,000 inhabitants, the towns fall into the middle of the category of towns with a size between 20,000 and 30,000 inhabitants. This category contains 98 of the total 458 towns listed in 2006 (21 %).[6]

In the selected municipalities, some cases had to be selected. As suggested in *Chapter 1*, culture in municipalities is normally seen in a negative light by the national press. If there is something to say about it, it means there is something wrong with it. In the national news culture in municipalities comes to the fore mostly in the department of 'Big Trouble'. Examples were Volendam, Enschede, and to a lesser extent Den Helder and Delfzijl. Now, of course, these are phenomena that researchers should worry about, and public administration can fulfill a role in this. But does that imply that the study of culture in local government should be about the cases that are troublesome enough to reach national press? From a methodological point of view, crises offer a very good opportunity to study culture because actors are generating accounts that display a lot about what is normally taken for granted. Others have made a similar point before (compare Lijphart 1979[1968]:116; e.g. Weick 1985: 386; Derksen 1990: 28). But limiting the study of culture to what is *retrospectively* perceived as problematic, to the extent that national newspapers start to get interested, was not my intention.[7] This research is not aimed at finding the causes of these kinds of problems in retrospect, but at understanding how issues recognized as relevant in municipalities are made sense of.

Asking actors at the outset of the fieldwork what they, as a collective, would be busy with during the fieldwork period was the way cases were selected. The selection criterion used was the richness of the case, in terms of my opportunities to observe many meetings and talk to many actors about an issue that they, as a collective, were busy with. Like accessibility, this is part of the effort to maximize the possibility to learn. Just like ethnographic fieldwork and interpretive research in general, this way of selecting takes the native's world as a starting point. It offers the chance of starting with actors' definitions of what is important. It does not have to involve losing a critical stance towards the things that actors tell you. In theoretical terms, although the concept of 'power' was not used, it is shown throughout the book how some stories are organized in and others are organized out of the sense making that takes place. Leaving aside those who seem only interested in the outcome of cross-case comparisons that generate causal explanations and theories (King, et al. 1994; Yin 2003) and therefore not in cases as such, Lukes (1974) and Bachrach and Baratz (1962) offer an important reason not to select cases with the help of those close to the center of power. Issues that are recognized as relevant for the municipality certainly do not have to be the issues that could be relevant if one were to ask the inhabitants of the municipality for their opinion. In addition, other ways of approaching 'culture' could have been possible as well. For instance, it is possible to look at things that seem to go as planned, things that were seen as routine (cf. Spillman 2005) and do not get a lot of attention. Those kinds of research can be considered valuable alternatives to what has been done here.

An unforeseen result of my attention to issues on the agenda in two of the cases led to a focus on politicians more than civil servants, citizens and other involved parties. Similarly, in the other two cases, there was a focus on spatial issues as opposed to administrative or social issues. This, however, is also a meaningful result in the sense that politicians and spatial issues in two of the four cases dominated the collective sense making, whereas this could also have been different. Politicians could have been giving more opportunities for other actors to have an important say in the matter and spatial issues might have been framed as social issues. The theoretical interest and the case selection also led to less attention to issues in implementation than to issues of problem definition.

3.2 Doing Fieldwork

In both municipalities my stay was introduced with a formal letter to civil servants and council members. In both municipalities the fieldwork lasted five months. I did, however, go back in the months afterwards on several occasions to do an interview or visit a meeting, which was necessary to gather some additional data. In both municipalities a desk and access to meetings and archives were provided. During the fieldwork period, two or three work days and one or two evenings were spent in the municipalities. All work days and evenings with meetings or interviews in the municipalities began and ended with walking or biking from, and to, the local train station. On two occasions the use of a car enabled me to stay until a long meeting had finished. To get an overview of what was going on in the municipality, meetings were attended and introductory talks were arranged with aldermen and department heads in the local bureaucracy. After talking to various actors and observing some meetings, two issues were selected for case study research. Although during the first two months a variety of meetings were attended, during the last months the fieldwork was completely devoted to the selected processes.

At the beginning of the fieldwork I tried to find out about meetings that could be attended and actors who could inform me about the issues. I made a habit of sitting in on the weekly meetings of the board of mayor and aldermen. This gave me, on the one hand, an overview of things that were going on in the municipality and, on the other hand, a sort of rhythm. During the fieldwork most of the council meetings, many meetings of the council committees, and meetings of the management team of the local bureaucracy were observed. In addition, observation of meetings took place in the local bureaucracy, or in town, that were linked to cases under study and various presentations of plans to some public from outside the town hall. Finally, meetings of political parties, of sounding boards, and of a neighborhood committee were visited. In the field, notes were made on what actors did – mostly what they said - during meetings, interviews etc., and what the meanings of those acts might be. Overall, the observation sessions made it possible to generate data that would have been impossible to generate through document analysis, and hard to gather through interviewing. The minutes of most of the meetings I observed were very brief. Regular observations were made of the researcher's personal feelings and the methodological aspects of the research. In total, the two periods of fieldwork amounted to around 30 ('a5'-size, 100 pages) notebooks. Codes were used in these notebooks, not proper names or names of functions, to refer to actors so informants would be, to some extent, protected in case a notebook got lost.

In both municipalities copies were obtained of a large number of documents. There were agendas of meetings, minutes of meetings (including various transcriptions of debates), policy documents, speeches by politicians (which I asked for after the meetings), local and regional newspaper articles, texts on the municipal website, materials on websites of political parties, political pamphlets and political programs. Since I was not present during the time one of the interpretive processes (*Chapter 7*) took place, I had to rely on documents and observations of discussions of the process more than on my own observation of the process itself. Luckily, the public debate in the council, by which the process came to an end, had been taped and transcribed. Furthermore, because of the importance of what happened in Free City, a large file about the process had been prepared for council members and an investigation took place during my fieldwork.

During the two fieldwork periods many conversations with actors involved in, or knowledgeable about, the cases took place before and after meetings, during breaks, in the hallways of the town hall, during lunches and dinners. Around 90 actors, half of which in each municipality, were interviewed in a more formal way. To get a good overview of the way actors made sense of what was going in the cases, a selection was made that was meant to reflect a large number of the actors involved in governing. In each of the cases this included: two politicians of each party, all members – except one - of both boards of mayor and alderman, various members of management teams of the local bureaucracy, several civil servants and actors in the civil society who were involved in one or two of the cases in a municipality. For one of the processes in Heartless Town, a consultant and a project developer were interviewed (*Chapter 5*). In Free City two former members of the board of aldermen and mayor, and a planning consultant were interviewed. In Free City a journalist was interviewed and in Heart-less Town a journalist regularly gave me a ride home after meetings at night. Interviews with active citizens took place mostly in the last case (*Chapter 8*).

The interviews took place in the building of the local bureaucracy, in office buildings of local organizations, or at people's homes. Most interviews lasted between one hour and a quarter and one hour and three quarters. The format of the interviews was more or less open. In the first place, I talked with all actors about the municipality as a town, its politics, the local bureaucracy and the board, and then about the specific cases under study. In many instances, a conversation had already started before the tape recorder was on and I had to ask the respondent whether it would be alright if I started taping. Often the respondent did not have to be directed towards issues because she or he would talk about them of her or his own initiative. Following Weiss (1994), an effort was made to put the respondent at the center and follow up on his or her lead when this person was talking about a certain issue. In the last part of the interview a more conversational way of interviewing was aimed at, allowing for the possibility of confronting the respondent with possible conflicts between the accounts given during the interview and other accounts that had come to my attention.

3.3 Being in Practice

As was stated in this chapter, ethnographic fieldwork is something else or, perhaps I should say something *more,* than using well-known methods and techniques. Being a researcher in the field involves having a certain position during a certain period of time and having experiences that are related to this. Although it is not very common to reflect on this position, the occasions that it is done can give important insight into the relationship between the field and the research. These are not necessarily heroic tales, but rather take the form of confessions (Van Maanen 1988). These confessions result from 'an attempt to explicitly demystify fieldwork or participant-observation by showing how the technique is practiced in the field (ibid: : 73).'

Researchers doing ethnographic studies of processes that unfold might expect to feel lost, especially in the beginning of the research. This might mean having no clue as to what is important to notice and what is not, resulting in the ethnographer trying to write everything down in his notebooks that could prove to be important (Parker 2000: 238). It might mean sitting for hours and hours in meetings that later on hardly seem to contribute to the research. These were also the experiences I had. Finding one's way in the filed is a normal part of a more inductive approach. Compared with a more deductive approach to research, this does demand from the interpretive research(er) an 'improvisational quality' (compare Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2006: 324; Yanow 2006: 70). The researcher and the design should be flexible (Robson 2002[1993]), allowing the encounter with the field to shape the research. Learning from what is meaningful to actors themselves also allows the researcher to let practice surprise him. It also asks the researcher to actively make use of his own experiences. One of the gains of being in the field, mentioned before, was that the researcher can see how meaning is established along the way. It is telling to find out that actors do not know what is going to happen next or what might be important tomorrow, even if they know more or less what's on the agenda.

Most of all, the intense personal contact with people in the field over a longer time, sets ethnography apart from other ways of getting your data. It is a slow process in which maintaining contacts is important. Even though, as some promise, '[g]radually you become part of the furniture' (Rhodes 2002: 414), it is hardly realistic to think one could shrink to the size of a fly on the wall (*and* not get hammered with a newspaper). As a fieldworker I was recognized, in the first place, as a stranger. The frequent introductions of my work seemed to turn my position into that of an appendix: someone who is there but does not fulfill a role of any importance. Nevertheless, actors in general took much time to talk to me and help me to get my data. Often actors thought some student apprenticeship in the local bureaucracy was being done or they asked how my master's thesis was coming along. On three occasions – two in Heart-less Town and one in Free City – the Chief Executive Officer of the local bureaucracy explicitly denied me access to a meeting. They wanted the total privacy a boardroom can offer. At other times, meetings that might have been interesting were found out about after they took place. At one point during the research I had the feeling of being part of an inner circle. This happened when, during an important backstage meeting between the board members, the civil servants were asked to leave the boardroom in order to give the board a minute for themselves. As the civil servants got up and I was ready to pick up my stuff one of the aldermen said to those present 'the researcher stays.' This gesture simultaneously showed the confidence in the person of the researcher and the 'hierarchical' position a researcher can obtain during the fieldwork. At other times, being part of the board's entourage seemed to raise some suspicion, that perhaps was never taken away totally, despite my explicit statements about the independence of the research.

Sometimes the actors might have tried to take advantage of my presence. The most obvious example was when, during a public meeting, an administrator notified the audience that with me around the board had a university scrutinizing its acts. My opinion was also asked for at various times. Most of the times talking my way out of that was possible, by pointing at my wish not to become too much involved in the object under study, or to my incapacities when it came to doing the work they were doing. Actors understood and accepted my ill-formulated reasons for not wanting to become an active participant in the debate. One time my opinion was specifically asked for and there was no way of opting out by any standards of decency. This was at the beginning of what turned out to be a long discussion by the board of Heart-less Town. The mayor wanted my impression of the discussion. At the end of the morning I told those present that, in my opinion, the emotional character of the debate that they emphasized over and over again had not really been as visible as might be expected after their proclamations. Whether and how this shared observation might have altered the debate (*Chapter 5*) I do not know.

Most of the time, I had the feeling of being simultaneously accepted and ignored. A short anecdote will help to explain how that is a possibly dangerous but at the same time interesting mix. On the night an important decision had to be made only 20 of the 21 council members were present. Doing a little calculation, based on my knowledge of the possible preferences in the council I told the person next to me - a well-known political veteran I interviewed some time before, - that the absent council member could make the difference. To my surprise my neighbor leaned forward and told the leader of the party whose member was missing, to call this member and tell him to make it to the council meeting before the vote. There I was, jokingly commenting on what I knew about the situation, while *en passant* having a major impact on what might be going on. The acts of the researcher and that of those being researched were all of a sudden painfully linked. Luckily, the party leader answered that the person would not come anyway. Later on, one of my informants suggested that the missing council member had not been present because he did not want to follow the party line during the vote.[8]

There are important things to be noticed. First, I was able to point something out to a 'native' that the native had not seen, even though he had been active in politics for a long time. This made me as much a part of the context or as knowledgeable about it as the native, since my actions could have had a severe impact through this person. This shows how being a stranger is just a matter of degree. During my fieldwork, I encountered many actors who were as much strangers as I was, for example because they just started to work for the municipality. And second, although I proved to be quite capable of participating, in the end this experience confirmed that my influence in the field was not that great. The context was not changed, because the absence of the council member was not a mere coincidence.[9] In sum, what can be learned from this anecdote is that the ethnographic researcher can become quite knowledgeable about what is going on, but this does not mean that he or she will be able to predict the consequences of his or her own actions.

Another episode worth mentioning is the time somebody tried to restrict my access to a part of the field. During an introductory talk with one of the civil servants about my fieldwork, this person asked what the topic of my work would be. Telling this person that I was going to ask actors about such and such issues and that the investigation by a consultancy firm into one issue interested me, he suddenly wanted to know who in the organization was supervising me. The question, apart from sounding a bit contemptuous at that point in the conversation, made some alarm bells go off. After trying to explain that I did not have anything like a formal supervisor in the organization, I said that the Chief Executive Officer of the local bureaucracy was the one who 'sort of' was my formal contact. After this, my interlocutor quickly changed the subject and my efforts to talk about the issue with him failed.

Soon after that conversation the office space borrowed from one of the aldermen proved to be a strategic spot in the organization, as it enabled me to see the person I just talked to going to the Chief Executive Officer. Still being of the impression that I would never be important enough to make people worry about my presence or even have conversations about it, I thought 'it can't have anything to do with me.. But, it could. A little while later the Chief Executive Officer of the local bureaucracy popped his head around the door and asked if a short meeting with him could be planned about the progress of my research. Previously unaware that chats about the progress of my research were part of my stay in the municipality, I deduced that this could only mean trouble. As it turned out, the possible battle over the content of my investigation became more of an organizational battle between the Chief Executive Officer and the person who objected to my research plans. Although the Chief Executive Officer told me not to partake in any of the interviews or others part of the investigation that was going on into the issue, I could certainly talk to politicians and civil servants.[10] Having allowed me into the organization, the Chief Executive Officer told me he was going to stick to what he saw as the most important organizational rule at that moment: a deal is a deal. For me this outcome was good enough to have the feeling I was still welcome and able to investigate what I thought was important to actors in the field.

In the first period after this small affair, I noticed that I was holding back on questions about the case during interviews, waiting until the respondent would bring it up him- or herself. Later on I got more and more convinced that respondents did not mind talking about the case and sometimes were eager to talk about it. I also came to the conclusion that, because the issue was important to respondents in their professional and perhaps personal lives, *they* were the ones who had to decide what they wanted to tell me, and what they didn't. After that it would be my responsibility to tell about their experiences in a way that would not harm the confidence they had in me. This second anecdote taught me something about the importance of a new organizational rule and about the way a fight between two actors in the field could be settled. It also made me realize that, although I could feel ignored, it does not necessarily mean that nobody would worry about my presence or the impact it could have. Access sometimes has to be defended explicitly and the way that is done influences the results of the research. In this case, the research in one of the municipalities could have ended before it had really started.

Together, these two anecdotes show how a researcher is part of the field for the time he is in it. But apart from a scientist being sometimes more than just a stranger among practitioners, science as fact-finding is part of the field all of the time. Finding 'facts' is a usual way of finding out what to do in a local authority. The need for facts creates the need for actors in the field, who write reports on what is going on. Like Kunda (1992) who ran into people 'doing culture' in the organization in which he was going to investigate culture, I was faced with *doppelgängers* (Czarniawska 1998: 46-49): researchers looking at more or less the same phenomenon as I was. As it turned out, these professional consultants had a different time focus than I did.

In another way science was involved in the cases because of the way my first fieldwork started. My supervisor was asked to give an introduction on having a core tasks debate (*Chapter 6*). Although at first the idea would be that colleagues of mine would have a role in the debate, this never happened. My colleagues offered to help the municipality, but this did not lead to the contact they expected. In my view this had to do with the way the case itself developed. The head of the bureaucratic organization got a big grip on the project and probably feared that university involvement would lead to abstract debates like the one my supervisor triggered. My presence in the municipality was, however, not in danger. My strong affiliations with those actors who were thrown out of the project did, at first, give birth to some awkward moments, because the person in charge of contact with my colleagues seemed to avoid me. But, because I did not want to get too involved in the matter and was not asked to do so either, my affiliations did not seem to interfere with the course of the project itself. Those in charge of the project did not ask me to stop my research or to fulfill an advisory role that my colleagues might have taken. Nevertheless, my ability to 'see' what was going on was most probably quite altered by the way I got involved.

3.4 Analyzing Data and Writing

At some point in time the researcher has to start figuring out what he thinks all he has seen and heard might mean. In interpretive research this begins in the field itself. Even if the researcher is just trying to write down what is said, he has to make selections, and thus interpretations of the field, in the sense of what is important and what is not. Being present in the field for some time is like learning 'the' culture (Spradley 1980). If an ethnographic researcher ignores all he learns about the developments taking place in the field at the time of the fieldwork, it would not get him very far.

Analyzing

Although in this chapter the activities of generating data on the one hand, and making research reports on the other hand, are talked about separately, in the research practice they are part of a more interactive or iterative process (cf. Yanow 1996: 35). Nevertheless, especially when the researcher returns to his desk, there are two hardly separable tasks that await him and from which he cannot run away any longer: getting a grip on the data and writing about it. Much of the analysis took place after the fieldwork, which forced me to trust the tapes, documents, analyses in notebooks, memories of events, the cultural knowledge gained in the field, and the conversations with my tutors and actors in the field.

The way I worked with the data can be separated into roughly four procedures. The first analytic procedure consisted of gathering and ordering all the data that I had on one of the four interpretive processes and then working on a chronologically narrative description of this interpretive process. A second analytic procedure was, with the help of my theoretical ideas about practice stories, to describe the material that made up the stories about what was going on. This involved analyzing *accounts* (Munro 1996) on issues. Actors in municipalities are constantly giving accounts on issues. Actors give accounts when they meet, either on formal or informal occasions, in closed sessions or in open ones. Actors write memos, e-mails, newspaper articles, policy documents and letters. Actors also give accounts in interviews, whether to journalists or researchers. Actors raise their voices, come to meetings, vote in favor or against proposals, and so on. Together all these actions form the totality of communications in a municipality. Refraining from all these actions, or postponing them, can also be interpreted as accounts (Blumer 1969: 16; Weick 1995: 37). In these kinds of accounts, whether a private conversation, a public speech, a formal memo, an interview or their absence, I have looked for elements of stories (see *Chapter 2*, *Section 2.3*). Making use of interview transcripts, observation notes, and other written documents gathered during fieldwork, I have turned the story elements into full-blown practice stories. In other words, from the many communications in practice I have reconstructed practice stories. This way of working with stories from the field is different from other ways that have been used before. Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2006), for example, asked participants in their research to look for stories themselves. After reconstructing the practice stories I have also given these practice stories names, like the *Back-To-Basics Story* or *the Bad-Board-Members Story*, which indicate what the focus of the story is.

Part of the difficulty in reconstructing practice stories might be their 'taken-for-grantedness' in practice. Stories are often told in a certain language that includes political/bureaucratic/managerial/technocratic (etc.) jargon and references to what is locally seen as common knowledge. Ways of giving meaning are often so obvious to actors that they do not talk about them in clear terms. Simultaneously, the familiarity actors, erroneously or not, expect others to have with what they say and do could bring them to refrain from elaborating on it. Stories do not always need to be spelled out for the users to know what is referred to (compare Boje 1991). Especially hidden interpretations of reality – referred to in this study as *hidden meanings* - by definition were hardly developed and presented in public. To be able to encounter them one has to be backstage or outside of town hall (Goffman 1959: 106-140). The ethnographic way of generating data (being in the field and using various methods over a long period) has helped me to effectively deal with this problem. Hidden meanings were most of all reconstructed from observations of meetings closed to the public, interview transcripts and notes on conversations. In this way, the official rhetoric could also be supplemented with stories that for one reason or another were not in use in public. A story about the alleged preferences of an alderman in Heart-less Town for instance was only told to me in interviews but never voiced in public. Being aware of the story helped me to understand the dynamics of sense making.

Stories of governing, in contrast to practice stories, were reconstructed with the help of both theory and empirical data. The first sketchy outlines of these stories about governing came from working with the data from the first two case studies. While working with the data, it became quite clear to me that these stories were not just abstract images that have nothing to do with the way actors make sense in concrete situations. On the contrary, these stories proved to play a relatively clear role throughout the processes under study. Later on, ideas on images of municipalities (Ringeling 1998; 2004) helped to ground them theoretically.

The third analytic procedure, using the results of the first two procedures, was to analyze what happened to the initial stories during the interpretive process and how stories of governing played a role in the cases. This third step makes my approach different from research that takes the level of stories as the main focus (e.g., Martin, et al. 1983). The way practice stories and stories of governing are related to each other and to each other within one case can bring the cultural aspect of storytelling to the fore. It shows that storytelling is an ongoing performance embedded in a context (cf. Boje 1991). Stories prove to be part of larger process of sense making in which they directly compete with other stories and develop through time. As my theoretical approach developed during and after the analysis of the first municipality, the initial case studies of that municipality were substantially altered in a second analytical iteration. At the end of the third procedure thick descriptions of cases were ready. Other researchers and readers can use these thick descriptions of interpretive processes to compare them with other processes (Schwartz-Shea 2006: 109). The most obvious comparisons are interpretive processes in municipalities in the Netherlands or outside of it. Thick descriptions can also be used for other kinds of comparison with sense- making processes in other areas of social life. The generic character of analytical framework developed in *Chapter 2* makes the cases comparable, to a certain extent, to cases of sense making in complex organizational contexts at large. It is important to keep in mind that the empirical part of this research was not designed for the purpose of comparison between cases starting from the specific differences or similarities in their specific content matter – e.g., spatial planning. This would have required an entirely different design. Rather than deciding on structural differences and similarities between *kinds* of cases, the cases were selected in order to generate ideas on the way sense making operates in municipalities.

A final analytic procedure involved comparing the four cases. Although a naturalist researcher does not want to see in what way the elements of the world are alike and a positivist researcher does not want to see the ways in which they are unique, a social-constructivist ontology led me to believe that researchers create the levels and categories through which they compare. I compared my cases at five points that are important in an interpretive process: the three kinds of meanings – initial, final and hidden -, the struggle over meaning and the use of stories. The patterns that were found are presented in *Chapter 9*. During all of analytic procedures I made use of all the different kinds of data generated. Careful reading of the minutes of meetings and policy documents proved to be an especially good way to get a first grip on the data. All the interviews had been taped, in the first municipality on regular tapes, and in the second, digitally. To gain insight into the taped interviews I did in Heart-less Town, I depended most heavily on the notes I took during the interview. At some points during the analysis I listened to the tapes to hear the exact wording of phrases, or to analyze the structure or details of the account the respondent was giving. Three out of the four interviews I did in Free City were transcribed. Although by this time I became of the opinion that minutes of public meetings and policy documents formed the best first entry into a case, having access to transcribed interviews sped up the analysis.

Writing

According to Czarniawska '[t]exts on method have traditionally focused on the process of conducting the study, assuming that once discovered, truth will write itself (Czarniawska 1998: 51).'[11] Interpretive research does not understand writing to be a neutral activity in which nature is mirrored. It should be clear that just like the practitioners they write about, scientists are practitioners who want to persuade their public. Apart from scientific writing being rhetoric (Gusfield 1976), writing about culture in municipalities is a creative act. As Van Maanen said about writing ethnographies: 'culture is not itself visible, but is made visible only through its representation (Van Maanen 1988: 3).' Moreover, writing about processes of sense making is a process of sense making itself. It is making interpretations of interpretations, as Geertz (1993[1973]) said. Researchers who write about the world of politics and public administration tell stories (van Eeten, et al. 1996). This study, as an account of what was seen, read and heard in municipalities and how that relates to what was seen, read and heard in the academic field, is intended to tell nothing less than a story itself - of which, of course, the interpretation is up to the reader . Nevertheless, it is not the same kind of story as the ones I discuss in the book. This story is of a certain type, call it scientific, or call it interpretive science. The writing process, then, is not the same, but still similar to sense making in municipalities. What follows from the idea of writing as interpretation is that the field has to be constructed in the writing itself. Writing, therefore, is a form of both analysis and creation. It is giving order to bits and pieces of data. Writing is also describing data in a way that shows to a reader views of what has been going on.[12] Moving even more towards a possible audience, writing is improving texts that already include most of the data that should be in there. It is coming to some kind of closure while at the same time constantly asking yourself 'is this 'really' what is going on in the field, in the literature, or in my research?'[13]

A specific feature of the way I wrote about the field that should get attention is that of the use of proper names. In order to gain access to the municipalities the promise was made that sensitive data would be treated confidentially. In addition, I told respondents at the beginning of interviews that I would do my best to use their statements in such a manner that they (the individual respondents) cannot be recognized in them. I added to this that I could never be totally sure whether a quote could in one way or another be connected to them, especially for those readers who are knowledgeable about the municipality and the actors in it. Later on I decided to invent fake names for the municipalities and the actors in order to live up to my promises. Although this is of course no novelty, some readers might find this unacceptable because it damages the trustworthiness of the research. However, in research that reports on actors, ethical obligations towards informants are most of the time more important than scientific ones.

Preview of the Cases

The empirical part of this research starts in the next chapter with an introduction to the Dutch municipality. Chapters 5 and 7 also start with a general introduction to the two municipalities in which fieldwork was done. The presentation order of the case studies is geographical on the one hand and temporal on the other. Chapters 5 and 6 present processes that took place in Heart-less Town. Chapters 7 and 8 present processes that took place in Free City. Most of what is described in Chapter 5 took place in the period between the summer of 2002 and the end of April 2004. The events that make up the stories in Chapter 6 can be found between the second half of 2003 and September 2004. What is described in Chapter 7 took place in October 2004. Although part of what is described in Chapter 8 took place before October 2004, most of the relevant policy making under study took place after October 2004. This final case study follows the process up until February 2006. The description of the cases in Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8 will follow the temporal development of the interpretive processes. In each case study chapter, the interpretive process will first be introduced. The second section will show the process as a simple one-dimensional narrative. The third section will analyze the case as a struggle over meanings about the issue under discussion, starting from initial meanings and ending with final meanings. It will show how stories were told that helped the actors to find out what was going on and what had to be done. At the end of the analysis there is attention to hidden meanings, and a table is presented that identifies which stories mattered. Each case study chapter contains a final section in which the culture of the case is summarized.[14]

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[1] In my view, doing interpretive research is not a mix of art and logic (compare Robson 2002[1993]: 456; Laitin 2003) as much as it is a craft that is learned both through reading about it and by doing it. Even if some people master this craft in a way that others consider them artists, their art will always reflect its own context of construction.

[2] The 'being there' aspect of ethnography can also be seen as a quality that good ethnographic writing should display in order to convince the reader (Golden-Biddle and Locke 1993; Bate 1997: 1163-1164).

3 This is not to say that reading texts outside of the field – as long as they are artifacts that are made in the field – could not be done with a similar interpretive attitude; it just points at

the advantage of the experience of learning as much as one can about culture 'from close by'.

4 In grounded theory studies referred to as the point of *saturation* (Robson 2002[1993]: 192).

5 This does not change the fact that relationships in the field have to be constantly maintained, access has to be gained over and over again, because one cannot ask everybody permission in advance and the field changes during the fieldwork (see second anecdote in *Section 3.2*).

6 This figure is the calculation I made with the help of statline.cbs.nl (last checked 31-06-2007), using the figures of 2006. The category between 20.000 and 50.000 towns (Derksen and Schaap 2007), contains 188 of the 443 towns in the Netherlands (42 %).

7 Nevertheless, Big Trouble was not far away. Heart-less Town had experienced a political fight half a year before I came to do my research. In Free City a political fight started just after I made an agreement to study there. Making the best of the situation I studied was the political fight in Free City. The other three processes I started to follow might have or might not have ended in more Big Trouble, but did not.

8 Of course, at the moment it happened I was only glad I did not have any impact.

9 The suggestion that the missing council member was not at the meeting because he did not want to vote according to party discipline pointed out to me that I still had to sharpen my analysis of these kinds of situations, since I would not always have an informant to help me with analysis.

10 Politicians have no boss in the formal sense as civil servants, so there was nobody going to tell me I could not have an open conversation with them.

11 According to Czarniawska (1998), following Oakeshott, science should be seen like a conversation. This conversation takes place not only in the text as such, but also through the practices of quoting and referencing.

12 The ethnographic fieldworker also writes about his relation to the field. This can be explicit, like in the previous section, or more implicit. Implicitly, the relationship between the ethnographic researcher and the field becomes part of final reports in the trade-off between the transparency of display of data through the writing and the anonymity promised to actors in the field. In other words, the researcher wants to write clearly and understandably about the field, but also wants to write in a way that does not harm the confidence of actors in the field. In many instances in this study, the second 'want' got priority, even though I never guaranteed total anonymity because it is impossible to know exactly what might give away the identity of an actor in the writing. In some instances anonymity might have resulted in relatively vague statements like 'a member of the opposition said' when I do have more exact data that would locate the actor within the opposition and would perhaps make the argument stronger.

13 After making case study descriptions in the first municipality they were sent to actors in the field to get some member feedback. In the second municipality this was not done, because of a lack of time. For the most part, this feedback was positive. The respondents had recognized the interpretation, agreed to most of it, and were sometimes surprised by the interpretive form of the report. Remarks were mainly about 'facts' like the number of seats a particular party had. In one case a reader protested against the way I described what was going on because he had the idea that his integrity was at play in one of the practice stories. Although I had never had the intention to reify practice stories in which this person played a part, for the next versions of the case description I especially did my best to make this

clear. In the meanwhile, the work was presented to my supervisors and academic colleagues at conferences and seminars in various parts of the Netherlands and Europe.

[14] The title culture of the case is not meant to attribute some kind of special ontological status to cases.

Part II

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Four Cases

4 Introduction to the Dutch Municipality

4.1 One of Three Levels

In this short chapter I sketch the Dutch municipality from an institutional point of view, presenting it as one setting that unites various events, actors and entities. Along the way I also point to developments in, and debates about, the Dutch municipality.

Characteristics

The Netherlands can be called a 'decentralized unitary state.' Since the middle of the nineteenth century the Dutch state has consisted of three territorial levels: the national, the provincial and the municipal level (see *Box 4.1*). In addition there is one functional level in the form of the water boards.[1] At each of the territorial levels, we find entities that consist of a territory, the inhabitants of this territory and a government. The Netherlands is one nation, there are - since 1986 - twelve provinces, within which there is an unstable number of municipalities. At the beginning of 2007 there were 443 Dutch municipalities (www.overheid.nl)[2]. The number of municipalities is declining due to amalgamation. Municipalities differ in various ways, for example, as a result of the number of inhabitants living in the territory, and in the degree of urbanization of the town or city.[3] The three levels of government have 'a general purpose' (Korsten and Tops 1998: 15): to govern the territories in which they are the authority.[4]

Box 4.1: Divisions of the Netherlands and layers of government

The Netherlands	Central (national) Government
12 Provinces	Provincial Government
443 Municipalities	Local Government

From an institutional perspective it is possible to look at the municipality as a local authority with certain characteristics. A list can be made with six characteristics of local authorities in the Dutch context (compare Korsten and Tops 1998; Derksen and Schaap 2004).[5] A local authority, first of all, has jurisdiction over a certain territory. The regulations and policies issued by the municipality are relevant to all citizens living within its territorial boundaries. Secondly, local authorities are part of a governing system in which they must interact with the provincial authority and the central government. A local authority becomes partly responsible for many issues as a consequence of what authorities at other levels of government ask it to do. This part of what local authorities do is also referred to as co-governance (Toonen 1987; 1990). Thirdly, a local authority has the right to levy taxes on its citizens, providing the municipality with an independent income. The extent of the municipal tax is a matter the council decides upon within the strict limits central government sets (although this has recently been changed). Next, like the two other levels of government, a local authority has the autonomy to decide its own tasks –'general purpose.' And, a local authority formally consists of three parts: a council, a board – of mayor and aldermen – and a mayor. The council is the formal 'head' of the local government. This council is democratically legitimated through municipal elections. There is a national, general law, the so-called Local Government Act, that prescribes the general, legal make-up of municipalities in the Netherlands in more specific terms. In March 2002 central government made a big change in the legal structure of local government when it issued the *Dualization Act* (Derksen and Schaap 2004, more on this in Section 4.2). Finally, a municipality is the level of government that is closest to the citizens (cf. Korsten and Tops 1998: 11-12), or at least this is the position it ideally takes.

Governmental Tasks, Relations and Amalgamation

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, municipalities have two kinds of tasks: first, they have tasks they perform in co-governance with other levels of government, and secondly, they have tasks they create autonomously. In the past it was common to state that local authorities have a subordinate position in relation to the 'higher' authorities. This position would manifest itself in the way other governments have to demand local government to do things for them and through the supervision the other governments have over local government. An alternative way to describe this intergovernmental relationship is to say that the local authority helps the other levels of government to govern within the boundaries set by the other levels (in line with the consensus story, see *Chapter 2*, *Section 2.4*). Hence, the term *co*-governance. A large part of what the other governments, especially central government, asks of a local authority is the implementation of regulations and policies that were decided on at other levels of government or the supervision of compliance to regulations and policies. Although regulations and policies come with meanings embedded in them, actors in local government will interpret them in order to fit them to the reality *they* have constructed - whether they are explicitly given the space to do so or not - (Derksen and Schaap 2004).

A large part of the budget a municipality receives is meant to provide for the implementation of national and provincial regulations and policies, even though some of that money might be earmarked only in a general way. Municipalities are also under supervision. The provincial authority will, for example, check the financial plans of the municipality on a yearly basis and, in the case of a problematic balance, start intense supervision. In line with its fourth characteristic, a local authority is the general government of its territory and has the freedom to take into account all matters of local interest in the act of governing. What this means is that the local authority can 'initiate all sorts of policies it considers important for the local community' (Hendriks and Tops 2003: 302). Here resides the autonomy of municipalities. The total range of tasks, in principle, is unlimited and thus municipalities can make any issue its concern, as long as it is not in conflict with, or already addressed by, a regulation or policy the central government or the provincial authority has issued. Historically, the number of tasks local government has been fulfilling autonomously has decreased while the number of tasks local government has fulfilled in co-governance have increased (Derksen and Schaap 2004: 11).

The Association of Dutch Municipalities has been fighting against the subordinate position of local authorities in relation to the other levels of government for a long time (Korsten and Tops 1998: 15). Through a pamphlet of their association, the municipalities have demanded more autonomy lately, which could be created through the decentralization of tasks and authority, more money that can be spent according to the wishes of the municipality, and less supervision in trade for more accounting for actions towards citizens (VNG 2006b). Among academics, the idea of a subordinate position has also been discussed. According to Toonen (1990), the original ideas behind the Dutch state are not the ones that are often associated with the term decentralized unitary state. The idea of a unitary state in the literature seems to imply a system in which relationship between central government and other levels would be that of a hierarchy, whereas the Dutch governmental system is originally based on the idea of an 'organic system' composed of three *interdependent* levels.

Another matter of importance in the make-up of local government has been the policy of 'gemeentelijke herindeling.' In Dutch this literally means administrative rearrangement, but in practice it has meant fusing municipalities to form bigger administrative units. In other words, amalgamation. This policy has been pragmatic and typically directed at the urban areas until the 1960s, but after that became more systematic and directed at the countryside (Derksen and Schaap 2004: 216). Amalgamation became increasingly supported by the argument that to have enough 'governing capacity' (Derksen, et al. 1987), (*bestuurskracht*), municipalities should have the right size to be effective and efficient. Whether amalgamation has led to an increased governing capacity is not clear. It seems that the effects of the amalgamation have been limited. It has not led to a reduction in costs and, as a side-effect, the distance between the citizens and the local authority has grown (Derksen and Schaap 2004). The debates focused for some time on the idea of the minimum size of a municipality. Nowadays, it is not only the size as such, but rather the 'governing capacity' (as measured locally) that is taken into account when amalgamation becomes a topic. Another way of dealing with problems of scale has been to allow more bottom-up policy making. Municipalities have increasingly co-operated at the level of regions.

4.2 Inside the Municipality

Parties, Elections and the Council

The local authority in a town or city formally consists of three bodies: a council, a board - of mayor and aldermen - and a mayor. A municipal council in the Netherlands has between 9 and 45 members, depending on the number of inhabitants in the town or city. The council is formed from the outcome of municipal elections for which every inhabitant above eighteen years old can vote.[6] Before the municipal elections, which take place every four years, political parties play an important role in providing political programs and candidates for the seats on the municipal council. The bigger national political parties have their branches in many municipalities. Labor – social democrats ('Partij van de Arbeid'), the Christian Democrats ('Christen Democratische Appèl'), the Liberals ('VVD'), the Liberal Democrats ('Democraten 66'), the Green Left ('GroenLinks'), the Socialists ('Socialistische Partij'), the Political Reformed Party ('Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij') and the Christian Union ('ChristenUnie') all have local branches, although they are not represented in all municipalities. A fair number of the votes go to local parties.[7] Campaigning for the local elections is a national affair, partly because the local elections in all municipalities take place on the same day, and because the results are interpreted as battles between the national parties. Like the difficulty of councils to engage more with citizens, the 'nationalization' of the elections (Derksen and Schaap 2004: 28) contrasts with the presumed characteristic of local government as having a closer relationship with the citizens than central government. Before the municipal elections, political parties supply a list of candidates recruited from their members. Political parties get seats in the municipal council according to the proportion of votes they obtain in the elections. During the four-year political term, the council has the general tasks of representing the citizens, deciding on the main lines of policy making in local government, and scrutinizing what the board does (Derksen and Schaap 2004: 56). In the view of Tops and Zouridis (2002: 16-20), the norm in the council is conflict over political visions, but a search for consensus is the reality.

The council meets as much as it thinks is necessary, but generally will meet at least once a month. The meetings are in principle public meetings, although the council can decide to deliberate behind closed doors.[8] The meetings themselves have quite a strict procedure. This gives the meeting order, structures the differences of opinion, and tempers the passions (Tops and Zouridis 2002: 22). It does not, however, stimulate a lively debate. The mayor chairs the meetings of the council. Before 2002, the year the Dualization Act was implemented, aldermen used to be members of the council as well, now they are not. Aldermen now receive an invitation from the council to come to the meeting if the council wishes to invite them. At the beginning of council meetings, stakeholders – individual citizens, members of local organizations, etc. – can usually address the council regarding issues that are on the agenda. After this the council talks about the issues on the agenda.[9] Debates on issues normally have two rounds, although a third one might be used. In addition to debating issues in general, the council talks about documents it receives, for instance letters from the board or members of a civil society, reports prepared by the local bureaucracy or external agencies, and so on. The council may decide on proposals made by its members or by the board. Council members and the members of the board can ask for a suspension of the meeting, allowing the parties in the council or members of the board to discuss proposals, prepare a reaction to proposals, and make deals with each other backstage. Civil servants can advise the board when it redraws itself. The council meetings are mostly organized around the handling of paperwork (Tops and Zouridis 2002: 23).

The proposals of board and council members, and possible amendments to it, can become the subject of voting by majority. It is typical that council members of the same party take a similar standpoint, although formally they are not obliged to do so. The parties in a coalition are expected to support 'their' board, although this is also not a formal rule. In both cases, if such dissent occurs it is frequently considered a problem of loyalty. Most councils have committees in which issues are discussed in detail before they are debated and decided upon in the council. Regular committees are those for spatial matters, social matters or administrative matters. In addition to council members, in many municipalities political parties can also put forward candidates other than council members for a place on these council committees. Since 2002 the council also has a secretary – called ‘griffie’ - and a budget to have general matters of interest researched and, more specifically, to have policies evaluated.

The Board and the Mayor

After the elections the political parties that have obtained seats on the council negotiate the formation of a board of mayor and aldermen. The party that acquires the highest number of votes usually has the initiative in the negotiations. Currently, it is often just a couple of parties that have a majority of seats on the council, and they are normally able to overcome their differences to form a board and make a ‘coalition agreement.’ Alternatively, the board can be formed in a way that reflects the distribution of seats on the council, called *afspiegelingscollege*, which is becoming a rare phenomenon. In the first case, a coalition of political parties is formed. The coalition normally has the support of a large majority of votes in the council and writes a coalition program. A coalition program is a document in which the coalition indicates its plans for the coming four years. The other parties form the opposition. In the second case, Lijphart’s (1979[1968]; Derksen and Schaap 2004: 58) rule of proportionality (also see *Chapter 1*) is in use. This rule says that every party or organization gets the share of what there is to divide according to the number of votes or members it represents. So, on the board, all or at least most political parties get their share of seats on the basis of their proportion in the council. This is, in turn, a reflection of the support among those who have voted. In both cases the political parties involved in the formation of the board divide the portfolios and propose candidate aldermen to the council. The aldermen, together with the mayor, form the board of mayor and aldermen. The board is responsible for the daily administration of the local authority. In that role it prepares and implements decisions made by the council. It also takes care of the tasks that the other levels of government delegate. In addition, the council can delegate some of its own tasks to the board. In practice the board has the most power in the local authority (Derksen and Schaap 2004), although it is not clear how the power relations will develop out of dualization (see below).[10]

Board members normally meet on Tuesdays to discuss issues of importance amongst themselves. The board as a whole is responsible for its acts. Governing together and being responsible as a unit (otherwise referred to as ‘collegiality’), is according to Schouw and Tops (1998) an important characteristic of Dutch political and governing culture. This leaves little space for strong board members who advocate their own political program like ‘pure’ leaders would. The position of the mayor in the board typically shows this character trait. The mayor chairs the board meetings and is supposed to connect its members. In addition the mayor normally has only a limited portfolio that includes matters like security and governmental communications. However, although collegiality is the rule, members of the board will often operate independently (Derksen and Schaap 2004: 65). They might even shield issues from other members of the board. The four-year political term of the board can be interrupted if the board of mayor and aldermen resigns, or is forced to resign, by the council. In contrast to what happens at the national level in this situation, no new elections will be held. The political parties in the council will form a new board.

The position of mayor in the municipality is special because the mayor has two roles: as a member of the board and as an administrative body on his own. Both in his relationship to the council and the board, the mayor is supposed to be 'above parties.' The mayor as a separate body is a special case (Derksen and Schaap 2004: 75-78). Central government officially appoints mayors for a six-year term and the Queen's Commissioner – the 'mayor' of the province – supervises the mayor's appointment and functioning. Over the years the influence of the council upon the appointment of the mayor has increased. Since 1972 councils can make their own profile for mayors to which the new candidates should fit. In addition, the custom was established that the Queen's Commissioner allows a special council committee to give advice about the candidates that he has selected. Since 2001 the citizens can also be involved in the procedure if a consultative referendum is organized through which the citizens may indicate their preference for one out of two candidates. The council can also advise the Queen's Commissioner when the mayor's six-year term is up for renewal. The council, however, does not have the power to fire the mayor, although it can ask the mayor to resign or for the minister to fire him. It has become normal practice that when there is a lack of trust (*vertrouwensbreuk*) between the mayor and the council, the mayor will be fired (Derksen and Schaap 2004: 78). The position of the mayor in the municipality has been the subject of debate for a long time. Various politicians and academics have pleaded for the direct election of mayors or another alternative for the appointment through central government. Recent debates on the matter, including those around dualization, as well as a proposal from the national administration, have to date not led to the direct election of mayors (Schaap and Ringeling 2006: 24).

Dualization

As mentioned before, the formal relationship between the council and the board was changed in 2002 through the Dualization Act. This law grew out of the advice of the Government Commission for Dualism and Local Democracy (Staatscommissie Dualisme en lokale democratie 2000). The commission advised central government to change the structure of local authorities in order to enhance their transparency. The final goal of dualization was the revitalization of local democracy and politics. Although the term 'dualization' refers to the effort to create a situation in which the parts of local authorities have clearly distinguishable – 'dualized' - tasks and authorities, it was seen in combination with a larger project: bringing about a cultural transformation of local government (also see Staatscommissie Dualisme en lokale democratie 2000: 17-18, 344-345; Begeleidingscommissie 2003). Dualization and the structural changes that it involved have been interpreted differently in the various municipalities. Researchers who studied the governing capacity and the governing culture concluded that dualization seems to have become integrated into existing traditions and habits in municipalities, rather than dualization itself changing the governing culture (Bovens, et al. 2006). Corresponding to these findings, the commission in charge of the implementation of dualization found at the conclusion of the project that governing culture maybe the most important factor in the renewal of local government (Begeleidingscommissie 2006b: 13, also see first quote in Chapter 1).

In terms of the legal and institutional structures, the division of tasks among the council and the board were changed in order to give them both a clear profile and to formalize a change towards a more independent board. This change had already been taking place in practice. Over the years boards in general had slowly taken over power from the council, making the specific role of the council unclear and resulting in an in-consistency between the formal status of the council as head of the municipality and actual practice. Not only should the council be focusing upon the main lines and scrutiny of local policy, but should also be re-establishing its role as a representative of the citizens. In this way it was to breathe new life into local democracy. Support in the council no longer means support in the municipality (Schouw and Tops 1998: 21). Although dualization has made the relationships in municipalities clearer, Derksen and Schaap (2004: 70) doubt whether the council can make up for its lack of power compared to that of the board. Since part of the desired revitalization of local democracy consisted of the revival of the council as a democratic forum, the council is supposed to strengthen its relations with the citizens (Begeleidingscommissie 2003). It is not for nothing that local government is supposed to be the governmental level closest to the citizens. Nevertheless, up until recently dualization has been most of all a project taking place within the local authority. Council members have not been engaged much more with citizens (Begeleidingscommissie 2005). A failure to increase their performance in this area can be seen as problematic, since it is in clear contrast with the publicized wishes of the Association of Municipalities (VNG 2006b) to make the citizens central to governing.

The Local Bureaucracy

The local bureaucracy is the organization that supports the board in the act of governing the municipality and whose members are usually referred to as civil servants. The most important role in the local bureaucracy is that of the Chief Executive Officer, *gemeentesecretaris*. He connects the board with the local bureaucracy. He is also the secretary of the board and in this role can advise the board about issues under discussion. Apart from preparing and implementing council and board decisions, the local bureaucracy takes care of the implementation of national and provincial regulations and policies. The local bureaucracy also provides services and products like garbage disposal and welfare checks. It is through the delivery of these services and products that this governmental level is, compared to other levels, seen as closest to the citizens. All kinds of local, regional or national agencies and organizations help the local bureaucracy in the fulfillment of its tasks. Some tasks, like garbage disposal, might also be privatized.

Local bureaucracies are different in size and organizational structure throughout the country. The differences depend, among other things, upon the number of inhabitants of the town or city, the choice of organizational model, and the local policy preferences. Local bureaucracies in the Netherlands have also changed over time (Hendriks and Tops 2003; Derksen and Schaap 2004). Local bureaucracies were very small in the nineteenth century. The Chief Executive Officer had a few civil servants working for him. As a result of the population growth in the towns and cities, the increased number of tasks, and the increased specialization of civil servants, local bureaucracies have grown. On the one hand, the growing group of civil servants working directly under the Chief Executive Officer was split up into divisions – together called the *secretarie*. On the other hand, services like fire-fighting, energy delivery, etc. became separate organizational compartments – so-called *diensten* (Derksen and Schaap 2004: 120). Up until the 1970s this organizational model, *secretarie-dienstenmodel*, with policy making, under the supervision of the Chief Executive Officer and a separate implementation of policies, was common in the Netherlands. The separation between preparation and implementation has since become outdated.

Throughout the 1970s, both inside and closely around the local bureaucracy relations became politicized and the organization was compartmentalized. The early 1980s brought changes that responded to the fiscal stringency resulting from an economic recession (Hendriks and Tops 2003). The reforms that took place in local government were closely linked to the rise of New Public Management, stressing the three E's of economy, effectiveness and efficiency. All kinds of fiscal-managerial tools became part of the vocabulary and practices of the local bureaucracy. The most well-known example of the use of these ideas has been in the city of Tilburg, whose way of dealing with governing has been referred to as the Tilburg Model (Hendriks and Tops 1999; 2003). Nowadays, many local bureaucracies still have distinctive departments that deal with both policy development and implementation according to the various tasks of local government. The structures called the 'concernmodel' or the 'sectorenmodel' became popular. This division typically corresponds to the organizational structure of the political part of the municipality, i.e., the council commissions. This is to say that there might be a social, a spatial and an administrative or financial department corresponding to the council committees. The department heads together with the Chief Executive Officer form the management team.

Societal Actors

A local authority comes into contact with all kinds of local, regional and national associations, agencies, organizations, etc. Some of these actively work together with the local authority, like the local or regional housing corporations. Elaborate forms of public-private cooperation might exist in a municipality. Possibly important and influential media for sense making in a municipality are the local or regional newspapers. The newspapers can be used as platforms for the local authorities to make announcements, and for actors to debate issues and criticize or praise local authority or parts of it. In addition to general societal actors, (groups of) citizens come into contact with the local authority: as *voters* choosing a council, as *clients* or as *customer*s receiving products, and as *servants* (not) obeying regulations and policies (compare Ringeling 1998: 116-119; 2001; Beukenholdt-ter Mors, et al. 2002). In these various roles the citizens can also be involved as a source of information enabling the evaluation of policies, for instance in a public hearing about an issue or a survey on customer satisfaction. Citizens can also decide to protest against acts of the local authority.

In addition to these rather passive or re-active roles, a general trend to stimulate citizens to become more actively involved and informed about policy *making* has been observed. Following the deplorable voter turnout during the 1990 municipal elections, the idea has grown that, although local government was supposed to be closest to the citizens, it is doubtful whether citizens in the present-day municipalities have that feeling (Hendriks and Tops 1999). A gap was perceived between those who govern and those who are governed. Not surprisingly, pleas for making the citizens central were and still are being made (Commissie Toekomst Lokaal Bestuur 2006: 11, 31). If they are more involved, citizens can then become *partners* or *co-producers* (Ringeling 2001; Beukenholdt-ter Mors, et al. 2002). This more active involvement, which brings citizens primarily into contact with civil servants and board members, is normally referred to as 'interactive policy making.' The citizens are supposed to be even more active in processes described as 'co-production.'[11] Initiatives in this area seem to be institutionally more advanced in their ability to mobilize citizens than the initiatives councils have developed.

There are many ways for and degrees to which actors can become actively involved or informed in policy making. An example is the so-called 'sounding boards,' in which citizens at an early stage discuss plans that are made in the local bureaucracy or by external parties. There is a variety of concepts policy makers came up with to point at the various novel forms of interaction and openness: consultation meetings, platform-of-support conferences, policy studios, civic conferences, civic market-research, tele-debates, neighborhood consultation, futurity debates, scenario workshops, invitation-to-coffee sessions, visitation rounds, opinion panels, neighborhood inquests and policy-emotion sessions (Hendriks and Tops 2003: 312). According to Hendriks and Tops these new concepts fit remarkably well with the Dutch three C's of consultation, compromise and consensus 'which had been de-emphasized in the 1980s – when NPM [New Public Management] was emphasizing economy, efficiency and effectiveness (the three e's) – but which now got re-invented' (ibid 2003: 312). In debates on citizenship, the image of the citizen-as-consumer, popular during the 1980s, and the image of the citizen-as-community-member, that had its revival in the 1990s, have been used as different and conflicting images of reality and ideals to be working towards (compare van Gunsteren 1991; Lowndes 1995). Especially the second way of conceptualizing citizens suggests that, in governing, the municipality is not, or should not be, restricted to the formal political-administrative organization. This is reminiscent of Derksen's (1992: 1-3) image of the municipality as 'a democratic platform for the local community' mentioned before (see *Chapter 2*, *Section 2.4*).

To Conclude

This has been a short chapter about the Dutch municipality. Although it offers a rather one-dimensional picture of a municipality, it can serve as the background for the four empirical cases. The main events, actors and entities have been pointed out. Several of the issues that were dealt with here will be of importance in the next chapters.

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[1] The areas that are governed by water boards on issues of water management (Neelen, et al. 2003[1999]) are also part of the state, although they do not have a general purpose (the government of the water boards is functional).

[2] Checked last 08-03-2007.

[3] What I say about towns in the rest of the text, also counts for cities.

[4] Of course these three parts and three levels themselves have their complicated relations with a fourth part and level: Europe and the European government.

[5] The characteristics will be presented in a different order than the book referred to.

[6] Foreigners can vote and take part in the council if they have been in the municipality for five years and hold a valid residence permit. Citizens can also be specially excluded from voting and taking part in the council. See Local Government Act (www.overheid.nl, last checked 08-03-2006).

[7] A little under 30 % in 2002, www.cbs.nl, checked last on 09-03-2007.

[8] In my experience this will be done only in case sensitive matters of finance or matters of persons are debated. In general matters which if made public would harm the public interest

will not be made public after the meeting either. Some matters, like firing an alderman (as happens in one of the cases (Chapter 7)) cannot be discussed behind closed doors.

[9] This is decided upon by a presidium whose members are chosen from the members of the council. It also includes the mayor.

[10] According to Schouw and Tops (1998) administrators – the members of the board - in practice make use of a mix of distinguishable 'styles of governing.' There are leaders, managers, connectors, ambassadors and caretakers. Leaders know what they want and are out to get it. Managers are civil servant-like board members looking for the most rational solutions. Connectors are board members looking for consensual solutions. Ambassadors try to become known among the general public. Caretakers take few risks and follow the rules.

[11] Putting the focus on individual citizens who play a big role in developing neighborhood cooperation in the Netherlands, Hendriks and Tops (2005) talked about 'everyday fixers.' Everyday fixers are citizens who play a central role in more interactive governing in neighborhoods, stimulating the idea that 'the recognition by those involved [in neighborhood development] that the logic of the local situation should prevail over the logic of the formal institutions' (ibid: 488).

5 A Heart of Stone

Communicate with residents and let's together make a nice town center where coziness rules, where relaxation can be found and where quality, service and personality are the first matter of importance for all entrepreneurs. A *heart* that makes a difference, and not a shopping island without real connection to the *real heart* of our municipality.

A local entrepreneur in Heart-less Town[1]

5.1 Introducing Heart-less Town and the Case

This case study examines an interpretive process in the discussions for a new center for Heart-less Town. After giving a general introduction to Heart-less Town and sketching the historical background of the case, the second section of this case study chronologically retells what happened in the center planning between 2002 and 2004. The third section analyzes the process using the idea of storytelling as the way actors make sense. Special attention is given to the way in which a metaphor played a role in the process. The final section reviews the sense making.

Heart-less Town

Heart-less Town is a town with approximately 25,000 inhabitants in the middle of the Netherlands. The town is located, as the members of the board liked to put it, 'excitingly' on the border between nature and urbanization. In the 1960s it was a small town, but since then it has grown rapidly. A whole new district was built on the west side of town over the last decade, and it is expected that it will grow further towards the southwest. An interview respondent said that it 'was in origin a rural town that has attained more and more urban traits. The people want the things that belong to a rural town like quietness, security, social security, […] particular certainties, and attention for you as a citizen of government. People want this to be safeguarded. But now this is under pressure. In [the new district] people hardly know each other….' The new inhabitants are known to be commuters who like to live in the country. These people are hardly socially integrated in the town. Some interview respondents therefore wonder whether Heart-less Town is a town or a commuter village. Interview respondents also described this question of town or commuter village in terms of a struggle between the past and the future. A clear distinctive feature of the older town is religious color. This is reflected in politics. In Heart-less Town a rather strict protestant political party, the Local Christians, has been able to gain big support through the years among a stable group of voters. Everybody in and around local politics does, however, seem to agree on one characteristic of the town: it does not have a proper center in the sense of a heart that unites the neighborhoods of Heart-less Town.

The council in Heart-less Town has 21 seats (see *Box 5.1*) and meets once a month. In addition there are three council committees. In these council committees societal matters, public space, and administrative and financial matters can be discussed. For the municipal elections in 2002 a new local party registered. This party, whose main candidates are former members of the Democrats and the Liberal Democrats, is called Combative Town. This party argued for a renewal in politics. It wanted the council to start listening better to the citizens. The elections resulted in big changes in the composition of the council. Combative Town entered the council with four seats. At the same time the Liberals lost two of their five seats. The local Christians became the biggest party, with five seats on the council. For the newly formed board, the Democrats provided a special alderman who was in charge of planning a new center.

Box 5.1: Local government after the 2002 elections

Council *(21 seats)*:	Local Christian Party (*5 seats*) Labor *(3)*, Christian Democrats *(4)*, Liberals *(3)*, Democrats *(2),* Combative Town (*4*)
Board (*4 aldermen*):	Local Christian Party, Democrats, Christian Democrats, Combative Town, later replaced by Labor
Mayor:	Term ends halfway through 2004

In 2003 the board entered a rough period. First, the head of the local bureaucracy resigned after working in the municipality for three months, then the mayor called in sick after conflicts in the board, and finally the board resigned. An administrative crisis was born. A national celebrity in politics was sent to the municipality to find out what happened and what should be done. After some time the decision was made to create a new board on the basis of a new coalition. In effect the change in the coalition and the board only involved replacing Combative Town with Labor. With the exception of the alderman of Combative Town, the composition of the coalition stayed intact. Not much became public around the period of the crisis, although it was clear that the new board had the idea things should have been done differently. The political program of the board was reduced to seven main points. Shortly after that, an experienced interim manager became the head of the local bureaucracy. This interim manager changed the structure of the local bureaucracy, cutting out one layer of management in order to make decisions faster and in a more transparent way.[2] As a result, the organization should be able to work in a more integral way. The local bureaucracy now had two bigger departments, various smaller departments, and over 200 employees. The management team now consisted of over ten members, but the real management team seemed to consist of a small group around the head of the local bureaucracy that also met on a weekly basis. After the summer of 2003 the local bureaucracy found out it had a hole in the yearly budget of 1.8 million Euros (*Chapter 6*).

History of the Center Planning

Halfway through the 1970s a small shopping center was built in Heart-less Town. From the second half of the following decennium, a discussion developed about the expansion of this center. In 1987 the municipal council decided that a new center had to be built close to the present one. After it turned out that local government had to contribute an amount of money it could not afford, a period followed in which one plan after another was proposed. Various project developers, but also political parties, made plans. The debates that followed were mostly about the right location for the center, although actors had different ideas about the necessary size of a new center as well. Most actors were in favor of some version of an expansion of the present, small center at Location 1, while others, among them the mayor of the town, were in favor of building a new center at Location 2, a spot that hosted some sporting facilities and a park.

During the 1990s and the first year of the new millennium, the local authority came close to actually building a center on two occasions. In the first case Location 2 was the most popular location among the board of mayor and aldermen, but the council (who has the decisive voice) overruled the decision and chose Location 1. Both decisions were won with the smallest majority possible. From 1996 onwards, concrete plans were made for the center at Location 1. Nevertheless, in 1997 a protest by a citizen's organization, composed of people living in the vicinity of the plan area, led a judge at the national level to come to the conclusion that the board had acted wrongly when it decided on the size of the center. The decision had to be prepared all over again.

In the second case a new alderman of the Liberals decided that instead of redoing the plan it would be better to make a new plan. From 1999 onwards a plan was made that was a lot bigger than the one before. It was called the Center Vision and it was aimed at realizing a complete center, not just a shopping center. In 2001 a large majority in the council supported the plan. Only the Democrats voted against it. Nevertheless, due to a conflict with the project developer about the cost of the new center, two 'independent scientists of fame' had to examine the plans. At the beginning of 2002, just before the municipal elections, they came to what the media called a devastating conclusion: the design of the new center was not feasible for both financial and legal reasons. Location 1 had dominated the 1990s and the beginning of the new millennium. It is where the small shopping center, built in the 1970s, is still located. It is also where the 'common sense' center is, according to many actors. Twice however, an alderman in charge had failed to build the new center there, and twice the planning had to start all over again.

5.2 Looking for a Location

A New Period

Taking place just after the conclusions on the feasibility of the Center Vision were made public, the municipal elections in March 2002 brought about changes in the composition of the council. The Liberals, who were attributed a prominent role in the failure of the Center Vision, because it was their alderman who was in charge, lost half of their six seats on the council. Labor, also part of the coalition in the period 1998-2002, lost two of their five seats. The Local Christians, the third member of the coalition, could count on a stable electorate and therefore did not lose seats on the council. With five seats they became the biggest party in the council. A new local party, called

Combative Town, entered the council with four seats while the Democrats retained their two.

Before the municipal elections in March 2002 some citizens had organized a small campaign to promote the candidacy of a fellow citizen on the municipal council. Although Mr. Koehoorn, the man in question, was on the list of candidates for the Democrats, his position would not normally have made him eligible for a seat. A journalist and some other 'prominent' inhabitants of Heart-less Town advised voters to get this 'top-class expert' into the council.[3] According to a leaflet that many inhabitants received, Koehoorn was said to be knowledgeable about local issues and had the capacity and administrative experience to deal with complicated planning matters. Therefore, the leaflet argued, 'he is the right man in the right place to provide Heart-less Town in a competent manner with a feasible and affordable center soon.' The 271 preferential votes in the election entitled Koehoorn to one of the two seats that his party secured. A seat on the council, however, was not what he occupied during the new term. Within a week after the elections, the new coalition appointed him the alderman in charge of planning a new center. This was the issue that was granted the highest priority in the newly written coalition agreement.

The new alderman, already a member of the council during three council periods of the past four years and, according to many, a supporter of Location 2 for a long time, energetically started to make a new plan for the realization of the new center. In the political program of the board for the period 2002-2006 an initial outline of the new center was sketched. To begin with the council had to distance itself from the last plan. A regional newspaper supported this conclusion when it stated that the last five years had led to '…a waste of energy, towering costs, bad governmental performance, skeptics among the citizens and a loss of time for the entrepreneurs.' In the regional newspaper, the new alderman himself said: 'In the past ambition has prevailed over feasibility. There was a lack of expertise that is again the result of the size of the municipality. My starting point is: with both feet firmly on the ground. We are here to build a center that suits Heart-less Town, not to realize daydreams.' As a way of taking care of the past, the alderman was going to 'unravel the legal spaghetti' that was the result of a 1997 'working agreement' between the municipality, the project developer and the association of local entrepreneurs.

In the first half of 2003 the local government of Heart-less Town suffered a political-administrative crisis. After the mayor called in sick and the CEO of the local bureaucracy resigned, a national celebrity in Dutch politics investigated the situation. In reaction to the short report that the investigator produced, the aldermen handed in their resignations and negotiations for the formation of a new coalition started. Three of the parties in the old coalition decided that the newcomer, Combative Town, was no longer welcome. Labor joined the new coalition. In the end, the new board was formed with only one replacement: the alderman of Combative Town. The new coalition agreement was less ambitious than the former. This, however, did not threaten the position of the center planning. Even though the number of policy priorities adopted by the coalition was reduced from eighteen to seven, the center plan was still the top priority. Although the crisis slowed the development of the center planning, the board started the second half of 2003 with the proposal for a new working agreement between the municipality, the association of entrepreneurs, and the project developer. In the working agreement, the three stakeholders involved agreed that to realize plans for a center they first had to go through two phases (see *Box 5.2*).

Box 5.2: Planning Center after Working Agreement

<u>*Phase 1*</u> (June - December 2003)
Goal: deciding size of center
Steps: 1. act: calculating center needed
actors: planning agency
result: Distribution Planning Investigation (report)
2. act: discussing Distribution Planning Investigation
actors: board and (later) council
result: size of center determined
3. act: discussing criteria for center
actors: board and stakeholders
result: four groups of criteria

<u>*Phase 2*</u> (December 2003- May 2004)
Goal: Choosing location for center
Steps: 1. act: determining attributes five locations
actors: planning agency and Project Team
2. act: talking to and with citizens and civil society
actor: alderman Koehoorn
result: societal support
3. act: comparing five locations with multi-criteria analysis
actors: planning agency
result: Location Report
4. act: discussing Location Report
actors: board
result: proposal board with location choice
5a. act: discussing location report
actors: council committee for public space
b. act: discussing proposal board
actors: council
result: acceptance, amendment or renouncement proposal board

In the first phase an investigation determined what size the new center of town needed to be. In the second phase, although this had been done on two occasions before, a location choice had to be made. Now not just Location 1 and 2, but in total five possible building sites were investigated for their suitability as a center. The board urged the council to approve the working agreement with speed. Moreover, as interview respondents said, nothing could be changed in the text of the working agreement. Although various parties doubted the use of investigating all five locations and the Liberals and the Christian Democrats had many comments on the new agreement, a majority of parties in the council agreed with the new working agreement. After the summer a new Project Team for the center's planning was also installed. Several planners from an external agency were hired to staff Project Team. Setting up a new organizational structure within the local bureaucracy, alderman Koehoorn involved actors who did not have a past with other plans like the Center Vision.

The investigation on the required size of the center, the so-called 'Distribution Planning Investigation,' was published in November 2003. A planning agency from a big city, not the same as the one that provided planners for the Project Team, had conducted the investigation. As the starting point for the report, they took the current 'structure of retail' in Heart-less Town. Starting from the idea that a center was needed with shops that drew customers, the report argued that to prevent things from getting worse, the municipality needed to build a center that was 'economically viable,' The report was based on calculations of supply and demand. Corrections to the results of these calculations were made on the basis of a regional benchmark that took 'the specific situation of Heart-less Town' into account. In addition, these results were discussed with civil servants and, where necessary, adjusted with 'a healthy ambition in a realistic setting as a starting point.' Even though the report mainly talked about calculations of e.g., the 'critical mass' necessary to attract retailers who operate at the national level, customer needs, the proportion of food and non-food, it also acknowledged the wish in Heart-less Town to build a center that was more than 'just shops, [a] center that will become the "sparkling heart" of the municipality.' The central outcome of the investigation was the minimal and maximal surface the new center could have. In December 2003 the council approved the report together with a demand for more money to continue investigations during the second phase.

In the meanwhile, the project developer and the board determined on the one hand the criteria on which the five potential locations would be compared, and on the other hand, the relative importance of the criteria. The list of criteria was divided into three groups of criteria that in total contained 29 items. These groups were the physical aspects of the locations, the costs and benefits of the locations, and the fit the locations had in the urban and retail structure of Heart-less Town. The board itself added one group of criteria in order to make its own political statement. Their addition was just one criterion: societal support. According to the board members this criterion is not measurable like the others and the board members have to determine it themselves. Among other things they should do this through their knowledge of Heart-less Town and through their contact with citizens and other stakeholders during the planning process.

A Second Phase

The first planning step in the second phase, as alderman Koehoorn formulated it, was to 'determine the D.N.A.' of the five selected locations. During this first step the newly installed Project Team, with the help of the regular civil servants, started gathering factual data for the 'Location Report.' This Location Report, in which the separated locations would be presented and compared, was meant to help politicians on the board and the council committee for public space to choose a location for the new center. While the civil servants were busy gathering facts, the alderman chaired ten meetings with representatives of various segments of society (churches, entrepreneurs, sports clubs, etc., ten groups total), and four meetings with the residents who lived in the vicinity of the locations under investigation.

During the meetings, which all took place in January 2004, alderman Koehoorn told his audience about the what, how, and why of the center planning. He talked about the need for a new center and painted a history of problematic planning. Admitting that local government had failed up until that moment, he stressed that this time the planning would be different. This time the board of mayor and aldermen were working on a feasible plan. The selection procedure should be done in a rational way, even though emotions were part of it.[4] The difference between meetings with representatives of segments of society and with citizens is that in the first type of meetings there is room for some debate. The meetings with the citizens are set up most of all to inform, and are what an organizer of one of these debates in an interview called 'one-way meetings' (i.e., meetings in which the direction of communication is only from the local authority to the audience).

During observation of the meetings, it turned out that especially the second kind of meeting was presented as 'we want to inform you on what we are doing' and are listening very well to what you are saying (for listening the term 'register' was used frequently). The attendants of the meetings raised a wide variety of questions. A Communication Report that contained the minutes of the meetings that the alderman, in the name of the board, had with citizens and representatives was published in April 2004. There were also various sessions of a sounding board, in which citizens who volunteered took part. This sounding board, of some ten members, got together with the alderman and a member of the Project Organization. It had the task of talking about the center planning, and later on, writing the Location Report from a citizen's perspective.

In the same period as alderman Koehoorn met the public, the same planning agency that wrote the report for the first phase started to do a 'multi-criteria analysis.' This analysis involved comparing the locations on the basis of the established criteria in order to decide which location was most suitable for a center. In March 2004, long before the Communication Report, the Location Report was finished. The scores of the various locations were added up to a final score that indicated the suitability of the location on a scale of 1 to 100, to one decimal point. Location 2 was the best location (with 81.6 points), followed at quite a distance by Location 3 (68.4). Surprisingly enough for the actors involved, Location 1 only reached third place (66.2). Selected two times in the past, Location 1 had been one of the two main contenders.

The board took its time discussing the results of the report and came to its own decision. During one of its sessions, one board member noticed that the report could have had another outcome if the criteria would have been different. The others, however, mostly wanted to stick to the report and the criteria as they were. Nevertheless, although in the report Location 2 was clearly the best option, some board members seemed to doubt whether just choosing this location was what they wanted, and what their parties would find convincing. The board members knew Location 1 was still very popular in the council. Moreover, they and their parties wanted the center to be a 'heart,' and this is exactly the connotation that had been linked with Location 1 in the previous plan (Center Vision). Therefore, something should be done to satisfy those who were in favor of the Center Vision and Location 1. Halfway through April the board decided to choose Location 2, after adding among other things, that an 'organic link' between Locations 1 and 2 had to be created. This organic link was defined as an area located between Locations 1 and 2 that would be developed in such a way that it would connect the two locations.

Political Struggles

After making their decision the board presented it to the public and defended it as their proposal. At this point, the process became more hectic. The actors in and around politics were confronted with the Location Report and the board's proposal. The political parties in particular do not just accept the proposal they are confronted with, which can be concluded from the 150 written questions about the report and the board's proposal.

Various acts were organized in order to prepare for the final decision by the council. The board organized three public sessions to which they invited residents in the area surrounding Location 2, the inhabitants of Heart-less Town more generally, and the representatives of the societal sectors. Also, the location report was discussed in a long special meeting in the council committee for Public Space Matters. This took place over three evenings. During the first evening, five stakeholders used the opportunity to give their opinion about the board's decision. One of the political parties opted for a public hearing on the location choice and others informed them about the possibility of organizing a referendum, neither of which materialized.[5] Various council committee members were not satisfied with the poor results for Location 1 and asked for additional calculations. The fights between supporters of Location 1 and supporters of Location 2 that were present during the 1990s seemed to be repeated at the meeting of the council committee. During this period various stakeholders also made use of the opportunity to react in written form (letters to newspaper or board) to the decision of the board. Among the stakeholders that reacted was the Association of Entrepreneurs, which showed, through its president, its support for the board's decision.[6]

On the second evening of the special meeting of the council committee Termaat, spokesman on the council committee for the coalition party Christian Democrats, put forward a new option. Although Termaat had been critical of the center planning during the new period, his own alternative plan came to many as a surprise. In a speech, he argued that the decision for the center was not a decision to be made just for 30 years to come, as alderman Koehoorn had argued, but for the coming 100 years. According to Termaat, Location 3 was better suited for building a center, among other things because the town would grow in the direction of Location 3. After a suspension of the meeting in which the board and civil servants discussed among themselves the best way to react, the alderman gave a counter-speech in defense of Location 2. This time, instead of depending on the Location Report (as he had done mostly up until that point), the alderman tried to convince the council committee of the superiority of Location 2 by articulating a broad vision of the future. This vision entailed making the new center an area that involved both Location 1 and Location 2 by means of the organic link. The visionary speech was the welcomed moment in which the vision of the board became clear, but at the same time there was a critique. This was because the center was getting rather big as a consequence of the way alderman Koehoorn stretched the center in order to include Location 1.

The weeks after the second evening of that special meeting of the council committee were filled with discussions and speculation, in both the town hall and the newspapers, about the decision the council would make. The majority that the coalition had in the council did not seem to secure the victory that advocates of Location 2 were hoping for. Moreover, Location 3 was suddenly regarded as a reasonable alternative that could probably count on votes from parties that in the past had supported Location 1.

To add to the board's new problems, the position of the Location Report started to weaken when various council committee members argued that it was based on subjective assumptions. The planning agency that had written the report also lost some of its credibility in the eyes of various politicians when one of the council members found out that the agency's website stated that it worked for the project developer, and *also* took the wishes of the municipality into account – instead of the other way around. When, subsequently, a council member asked what scientific achievements the multi-criteria-analysis had delivered in the past, the consultant of the planning agency told the council that the method had been used in major Dutch projects like the Betuweroute[7] and the fifth runway at Schiphol Airport. Although the consultant used these examples in defense of the method, some council committee members showed their disappointment, as these projects were quite contested in the Netherlands.[8]

In the meanwhile the board asked the Project Team to elaborate and further develop the visionary speech alderman Koehoorn gave during the second evening of the special meeting. The board rejected a first version of the document - produced by the externally hired planners - because it was too technical, too reserved, not inspired enough. A civil servant from the regular staff produced a second version. In addition, most of the members of the board tried to convince the council members of their own parties to support the board. The Project Team was also ordered to show the benefits of Location 2 over Location 3. One alderman argued that his party should make its own decision instead of following the board. In spite of all the effort the board and those working for it put into the defense of their choice, the vote in the council promised to be a close call.

When the decisive council meeting drew near, the board indicated that the council should either reject its proposal to build on Location 2 or accept it. According to the board, it was unthinkable that the council would deliver a proposal of its own. Nevertheless, on the evening of the council meeting (the 27th of May), Labor and the Christian Democrats handed in an amendment to the board's proposal to build on Location 2. This amendment could be seen *de facto* as an alternative proposal. It stated that the new center should be built on Location 3. Even though Termaat, the spokesman of the Christian Democrats, had proposed Location 3 during the second evening of the special council meeting, the amendment was remarkable because it was made by two parties that were in the coalition. After a suspension of debates among the members of the board and members of the coalition, the board implicitly threatened to resign. This threat, however, was not convincing enough for the Christian Democrats. Some council members of this party seemed still in doubt and looked for a clear reason *not* to support their own amendment. After a second suspension, a stronger version of the board's threat was enough to bring three out of four Christian Democrats to the side of the board, because, as they argued, a second crisis in two years was not something Heart-less Town could afford. The final vote, made at the end of an evening filled with tension, resulted in a victory of 13 over 7 in favor of the board's proposal. The center would be built on Location 2 (for an overview of the new period of planning, see *Box 5.3*).

Box 5.3: Chronicle of the New Period

2002	March	Municipal Elections
	April	New Board
2002-		
2003	June	Juridical arrangements last center plan are reviewed
2003	first half	Political-Administrative Crisis
2003	May	New board (Labor replaces Combative Town)
	June	New working agreement center
	June	*Start Phase 1*
	June-Nov	Distribution Planning Investigation
	December	*Start Phase 2*
	December-	Approval Distribution Planning Investigation
2004	April	Second investigation (site research and multi-criteria analy-
	Jan-Feb	sis)
	April 12	Alderman Koehoorn meets with the public
	April22, 28	Board proposes choosing Location 2
	and May 18	Special meeting council committee for public space
	May 27	(3 evenings)
		Majority in Council supports Proposal Board

5.3 Making Sense of Center Planning

Each metaphor intensifies selected perceptions and ignores others, thereby helping one to concentrate upon desired consequences of favored public policies and helping one to ignore their unwanted, unthinkable, or irrelevant premises and aftermaths. Each metaphor can be a subtle way of highlighting what one wants to believe and avoiding what one does not wish to face.

Edelman (1967: 218)

Initial Meanings: The Center Story

The previous section gave an idea of the center planning in Heart-less Town. This section looks explicitly at the way the issue at stake was put in meaningful contexts. In other words, this section looks at the center planning again, but now as an interpretive process in which actors make sense through storytelling (see *Chapter 2*).

The issue at hand is not a new issue. Actors in Heart-less Town have given many meanings throughout a long past. Nevertheless, it is possible to decide on one seemingly simple, shared practice story containing the initial meanings of the issue. This basic practice story sets the stage for the sense making that is performed during the new planning period, starting after the 2002 elections. It can be called the *Center Story*. The setting of the story is the municipality and the center planning during the last 10 to 30 years, depending on the version of the story. Although a location had been chosen twice, the efforts to create a center have failed. The last event of importance is the failure of the popular Center Vision, just before the elections. The crucial entity in the Center Story is the center. Often what is missing in the municipality is referred to, in interviews I had with actors, as ‘a heart.’ Although it is not specified what a heart is, it is more than ‘just’ a shopping center. Various councils and boards in the past have worked on plans to create such a center. Location 1 and Location 2 have been popular. Location 1 as the location of the present, small center, was dominant in the planning during the 1990s. Those told to be suffering are the inhabitants and the local entrepreneurs. As will become clear in the following pages, the Center Story is not as simple as it seems. Various versions of it, some overlapping and some conflicting, started to play a role during the interpretive process.

Back-To-Basics

When the new period began, alderman Koehoorn - alone and together with the board and the Project Team - took parts of the Center Story to tell his own version of it. The issue of the lacking center was a pressing problem that received the highest priority in the board’s political plans. The alderman said the board had the entrepreneurs on their side, because they had been arguing that it was ‘five to twelve’ for them. Arguing it was now or never, alderman Koehoorn created a sense of urgency. When he talked about the center to various groups in society, the alderman used an example to illustrate how the center was dying. Not too long ago a shop in the town center closed down and this was a trend that had been going on for quite a while. The way the alderman told it in his speeches, what is wrong with the present center strongly resembled Stone’s *story of decline* (Stone 2002[1988]: 138) mentioned in *Chapter 2*: ‘In the beginning things were pretty good. But they got worse. In fact, right now, they are nearly intolerable. Something must be done.’

However, even if actors in Heart-less Town accepted that there was a pressing problem, this does not mean that they believed that it was solvable. Many actors in Heart-less Town were said to have become cynical about the efforts to plan a center. It was a never-ending story. One could almost become a fatalist. Therefore, alderman Koehoorn wanted to give the actors in Heart-less Town their hope back. And ‘[s]tories that move us from the realm of fate to the realm of control are always hopeful, and through their hope they invoke our support’ (Stone 2002[1988]:143). In order to do this a new reality had to be created in which the never-ending Center Story was turned into a tale with a happy ending. To convince the various audiences in town of a *Back-To-Basics Story*, the alderman and his compatriots presented a well-ordered setting in which all actors work together rationally to save the suffering town. Stone’s typical political story (Stone 2002[1988]: 142) can be recognized: ‘The situation is bad. We have always believed that the situation was out of our control, something we had to accept but could not influence. Now, however, let me show you that in fact we can control things.’

The Back-To-Basics Story frames the center issue in a world in which everything that was bad in the past is overcome through choosing the opposite. In that sense it is this story that receives positive meaning from the story it presumes to overcome. Whereas during the old planning period with its Center Vision political ambitions – daydreams - and emotions prevailed, this time the planning would be geared by feasibility and reason. Whereas the past stories of governing allegedly focused on abstract visions that were not attainable, the new practice story aimed at what was real and doable. The new story is clear and predictable. It looks for realistic solutions based on reliable knowledge.

The acts and entities that are presented as elements of the new story seem to illustrate the opposition between the past and the present planning. The first new entity in the setting was of course the alderman himself. His appearance on the stage was the result of a political campaign that presented him as the solution to the problem. According to the actors who supported him, what was wrong in past planning was the lack of a capable person in charge. The first thing alderman Koehoorn did in his role as specialist in planning was unraveling the 'legal spaghetti.' In addition the council was asked to distance itself from the Center Vision. This drew the new period as part of a new history. It forced the council to become part of the Back-To-Basics way of doing, as it says '*we* bury the past and start anew'. It also opened possibilities of starting new negotiations with entrepreneurs and the project developer. After this, doing research became the most important activity, allowing facts to replace emotions. It replaced political debate for some time, because the politicians were asked to wait until the results of the research were known. Various actors were introduced to fulfill the research act: members of the Project Team who were hired from an agency and an 'independent' planning agency. Although their acts were presented as merely supportive, these actors attained an important role as specialists in research and planning.

As a first step in the second phase, research was started to decide what kind of center was actually needed for Heart-less Town. In order to do this, calculations were made and adapted to the specific situation of Heart-less Town. This act not only created an image of an 'economically viable' center, it also postponed the sensitive matter of location choice. Three new locations were introduced to draw away attention from the eternal battles between Locations 1 and 2.[9] This inclusion of three additional locations enlarged the setting of sense making and helped to depoliticize the location choice. Then, a second research effort was conducted to establish the objective attributes of the locations under investigation. Since research had been done before, introducing the new locations also enabled the board to argue that parts of earlier research had to be done again. The concept of 'D.N.A.' which the alderman used to talk about the totality of these attributes, invoked the idea that locations have some hidden, but objectively measurable and inescapable truth that can be uncovered through specialist research. It helped to downplay the particular historical meaning of the locations to the actors within the municipality. Through another specialist act, performing a 'multi-criteria analysis,' the truth about a location became part of what was supposed to be a neutral narrative about the locations: the Location Report. Through the Location Report the specialists became capable of judging the suitability of the locations and thus replacing the politicians. The possibility offered by the result of the calculations should be noticed. Turning a complex description of the locations into a number between 1 and 100 (with a symbolic decimal point to indicate precision) makes the locations comparable in a very straightforward manner. All dimensions that could play a role are brought back to a single dimension (Stone 2002[1988]: 176).

The practice story that the alderman and his compatriots used was clearly a managerial one. The sense of urgency, the espoused belief in the possibility of finding the objectively most suitable location through research, and the effort to put feasibility above vision are all in line with this story. With the last element the Back-To-Basics

Story is also presented in contrast to the political story, claiming that the planning past had been one of unattainable visions, whereas the present will enable reason and feasibility to rule. The institutional set-up is also used, but it is complemented by additional meetings of the council committee, and specific arrangements to involve the public as an audience.

Bringing the Heart Back In

As the interpretive process proceeds and the reports are talked about in board and council committee, the Back-to-Basics Story proved not convincing enough to move the politicians. On the board there was some discussion about the impossibility of making objective choices at all. This became most apparent after one of the board members pointed out that the 29 criteria chosen and their relative weight had an inter-subjective character. Changing the criteria, or changing their relative importance, would create another outcome of the multi-criteria analysis. This doubt also developed on the council committee to the extent that some council committee members described the report as 'no more than a starting point.' In addition, the planning agency lost credibility once the word got out that its loyalties might have been primarily with the project developer rather than the municipality. The agency lost its image of objectivity. Now, the politicians argued, it was time to talk about political visions as the political story of governing would have it.

That the Back-To-Basics Story was not enough to convince a big part of the council is, to a large extent, the result of the way it ignores parts of the Center Story. The Back-To-Basics Story, with its rational calculations, does not show the way in which the center can be like a heart. Once the politicians got the opportunity to talk about the report, this metaphor – *the center as a heart* - became their tool for arguing that the report was limited. Something should be added. Using a metaphor actors see new things, but what do the politicians mean when the center should be like a heart?[10] The central feature highlighted by the metaphor is the comparison between a shopping center of a town and a heart of a town. As some actors explained in interviews about their town, it does perhaps have a small center, but it does not have a real heart. For many actors in Heart-less Town, the language of 'center' and especially 'shopping center' would seem to point merely at the place where shops are located. A 'heart,' by contrast, points to *more* than just shops. One of the entrepreneurs says 'just shops' would lead to 'shopping island.' Despite the rational way the alderman Koehoorn approached the planning of the center, he and his compatriots had already acknowledged that the proposal for a new center had to include more than 'just shops' in order to convince politicians. But in what way exactly is a heart more than 'just shops'?[11]

A Heart-As-Life

Analysis of the language used in the debates and reports in Heart-less Town suggests that a 'heart' is being used here as a *symbol of life*. This is a meaning that is arguably familiar to most members of the Dutch/Western society in which Heart-less Town finds itself. Nevertheless, that this meaning is familiar does not necessarily mean that actors will know in what way *a center* has something to do with life. It becomes clearer in analyzing the similarities in the meaningful contexts of which both are a part: the metaphor implies that the relationship between the center and the town should be like that between the heart and the body that contains it. This concept of heart-as-life has an important implication. The center is the part where life should be located. Next to shops, there have to be activities that make the center a lively place and not a place where after six you could 'fire a cannon without hitting anybody,' as one of the politicians stated. A new center that is lively, even after shops close, can gain support from the public. It can be considered legitimate because it is a place for everybody, not just consumers.

In the planning process, and especially in the preceding period, the use of this *Heart-as-life Story* was quite prominent. The ambition put forward in the Center Vision was to make a center that is 'lively and complete.' After the council found itself forced to admit that the Center Vision was not affordable, alderman Koehoorn adopted the heart-as-life story, describing the center at Location 1 as 'dying.' Putting forward this event, or rather *development,* is not new since it had already appeared in the previous planning period. If the cultural logic of the metaphor is projected on the problem, a dying center has terrible consequences for the town. Once the center-heart stops pumping blood, the town-body is dead. Talking about a heart-as-life which is needed, various actors tell stories about the need to rescue the town. By arguing that the planning for Location 1 was ambitious and not realistic and that the old center is dying, the alderman created space to look at the 'new life' of a center from a rational perspective. He depicted creating a new center as something that should make actors in Heart-less Town focus on the future. If we compare it to the Back-To-Basics Story, the future town and vibrant center become prominent entities in the Heart-as-life Story. The setting of what is important is also located more in the future. The first report started with the calculations of a center that was both big and small enough to be 'viable'. It also argued that the '*healthy* ambition' was to build a '*sparkling* heart' of the municipality. In a subsequent investigation the aim was, as the alderman put it, to determine the D.N.A. of various locations. Determining viability and D.N.A. are acts that are metaphorically in line with the heart-as-life idea. In other words, the reports and the language in it are attuned to the meanings that are part of the Heart-as-life Story, as well as the ones that form the Back-To-Basics Story.

Nevertheless, arguing for incorporating more than shops alone with the use of a popular metaphor was not enough when sense making started to take place on the board and council committee. Almost all members of the board expressed a desire for their choice of location to fuse facts and calculations of technical criteria with something else. The report was still too rational. The need for a heart was no longer interpreted as something that could be calculated. The board's idea of an 'organic link' between Location 1 and Location 2 built on the idea of a heart-as-life. Metaphorically, the link represented the vital, physical connection between various parts of the town as connecting various bodily organs. By arguing for a link, the board actually validated the idea that Location 2 could not be 'more than shops.' The link was meant to add life to the envisioned center at Location 2. The link represented the pragmatic way in which the board wanted to unite a rational solution (a score of 81.6 points is higher than a score of 66.2 points) with the most popular solution. In this way it started the negotiation with those who wanted to hang on to Location 1. Later on, alderman Koehoorn also presented the solution as a vision that took the municipality beyond a fight over Locations 1 and 2.

A Heart-as-Love and an Alternative

The total meaningful construct that appeared when the board proposed to choose Location 2 with an organic link has become more complicated. Whereas the Back-To-Basics Story depoliticized through calculation, the board now tried to use a compromise to depoliticize. The board started to make use of a consensus story of governing. Doing this it drew on various stories that are part of the Center Story. In the board's proposal we find, on the one hand, the planning that failed, and, on the other hand, the center that has to become a heart. However, with the symbolic bridge to the past there is yet another possible meaning that the proposal acknowledges in the center issue. This meaning, hidden in the Center Story, can be found if the heart metaphor is further analyzed. By extending the heart metaphor beyond heart-as-life, it becomes possible to identify a second meaning of 'a heart.' A heart is also a *symbol of love*. This heart-as-love as part of the heart metaphor is commonplace in society at large, but perhaps less obvious in the case of a center. Its meaning remained tacit to the actors using it (Schön 1994[1979]). Nevertheless, the biggest political party in Heart-less Town used this aspect of the meaning of a heart as their election slogan: 'A heart for Heart-less Town.' In other words, they told the audience, 'we care about Heart-less Town.' In this view, a heart is no longer a vital organ (machine) that pumps blood (or money), but the place where feelings are located. A heart refers to a love relationship that a community supports. Moreover, since this relationship develops over time, the *Heart-as-love Story* that can be reconstructed directs attention to the past. This is in contrast with Heart-as-life Story, in which the setting was mostly located in the future.

The Heart-as-love Story connects the citizens of a town in a more abstract way than the heart-as-life. A location that has been shared in this way for a longer time seems to give a sense of identity. The central entity in this story is thus community identity and what took place was that love for Location 1 steadily grew through time, resulting in the popular Center Vision. This is why Location 1 had support among political parties. For many actors in politics and the local bureaucracy, Location 1 seems to be where the heart of the town – its caring, emotive center - *already* is. A member of Labor referred to Location 1 as 'a heart grown throughout history.' The Liberals said it is 'emotionally and historically the real heart' of town. This sense of realness and historical identity might be lost forever if a center is built elsewhere.[12] The Heart-as-love Story has implications that are more severe for the Back-To-Basics Story than the heart-as-life aspect. A center is now the result of a historical process that develops over time and expresses itself in feelings for a certain location. This heart-as-love cannot be newly built and the attributes of the best location cannot be calculated in a straightforward manner. Making the Heart-as-love Story part of their proposal the board invited conflict into its own storytelling. Whereas the Back-To-Basics Story stressed the need to choose in a rational way, it was possible to couple this with the ambition of a heart-as-life. However, invoking the heart-as-love notion emphasizes a choice with passion. In other words, the board says it will provide it all. One of the members of the council committee recognized this in part when he said that with the visionary speech the alderman gave, on the basis of the board's proposal, the center would get very big. But the consensus was not sought between those who were in favor of one or another location. The consensus that was sought was also one between two opposing stories of governing: the managerial and the political.

Even though the proposal of the board was not able to fulfill the old dream of a center at Location 1, and holding onto the Back-To-Basics Story proposes something that conflicts with the extended heart metaphor, choosing Location 1 was not the solution that political parties in the council maintained. As the Christian Democrats, Labor and the Liberals could not have their favorite option, they were open to suggestions. An alternative was offered on a silver plate. Burying the past in a way that the board had not dared, council member Termaat of the Christian Democrats announced that the choice to be made was not one that concerned only the coming 30 years, but the coming 100 years. The Location Report would be a starting point, but the facts and calculations used have to be reinterpreted. Other criteria and another relative weight had to be used in order to create a vision that was really future-directed. Termaat argued that if they have to build a heart all over again, because past planning had proved unfeasible, they might as well really look ahead and focus only on the future. The town will move in the direction of a location that has not been in the picture: Location 3. Expanding the number of locations from two to five in this way, while appearing in the first instance as a sort of window dressing, becomes an important act after all. If Heart-less Town cannot have the center it desires in Location 1, it can still think about the center it just recently started to imagine. The future stretches out over 100 years and therefore the planning should not focus on present or past states of affairs, but on the changes that can be seen over a longer time.

The focus on the future, prominent in Termaat's account, corresponds with combining a future-directed interpretation of the Location Report with the Heart-as-life Story. Moreover, it means maximizing the way the Heart-as-life Story points at the future. While integrating heart-as-life with the report, it also acknowledges the conflict between the report and the Heart-as-love Story. The proposal by the Christian Democrats reframes the problem, stressing the need to have a political vision. The political story is made more important than the managerial story. The consensus story, since not a lot is known about the support for Location 3, is hardly invoked. The sudden popularity of Location 3 did not develop until after the committee members realized that, according to the facts and calculations, Location 1 was an impossible solution to the center issue. These facts and calculations might be reinterpreted but cannot be wished away any longer. The love for Location 1 has not withered away, but its feasibility as a 'heart for the future' is just not big enough. The center at Location 1 is dying and cannot be saved anymore.[13] The Center Vision for Location 1 in the previous period had been able to unite both the heart-as-life and the heart-as-love notions, but could not meet the rational criteria. For the council members who did not support the board's proposal right away, the recognition of the end of a dream might have brought with it the realization that uniting both stories by using the heart metaphor *and* the report in one proposal reflected a desire to unite everything in an effort to please all. In the Heart-as-love Story a romantic version of the Center Story can be found. It is this romantic image that the board's proposal, with its complex meaning structure, does not tell in a convincing way. The tacitly known, and therefore underestimated complexity of the heart metaphor, makes the proposal appear artificial. The all-uniting proposal enters a state of what could be called *meaning-overload*. Meaning-overload is a state in which many, partly conflicting meanings are given to what is going on. This might make the complicated story that is meant to contain it, built of various stories that are only partly in line with each other, unconvincing to the audience. The resulting ambiguity in the proposal makes it possible for all actors to find something they like, but also something they dislike or even hate.

A Feud, a Fight and Final Meanings

A critical view of the passion involved in the interpretive process can also help us understand why some political parties followed Christian Democrat Termaat. For this, it is necessary to view the more hidden use of the political story of governing. The center issue was a longstanding feud between advocates of two different locations. More than a romantic story about the identity of Heart-less Town, the Center Story has in it a story about the identities of actors in, and closely around, the political and bureaucratic organization. For many actors in the local government of Heart-less Town, the end of Location 1 was the end of something they had passionately fought for. For civil servants and leading politicians the Center Vision for Location 1 had been 'like a baby.' One civil servant even kept a large scale model of the Center Vision in his office. But it also involved alternative plans that they have resisted. Taking into account their sudden move towards Location 3, it looked like the parties not only had a weak spot in their heart for Location 1; they also had a problem with Location 2. Being in favor of Location 1 *and* against Location 2 had been the identity of political parties and of the many individual actors politically involved. This is the emotional element of the Center Story that the Back-To-Basics Story was trying to get rid off in the first place. However, it proved a reality that could only be hidden for some time. Although the board's proposal was presented like a possible compromise, those opposing Location 2 seemed to interpret it as a possible defeat. The feud over Locations 1 and 2, already part of the Center Story, appeared to be decided upon in favor of Location 2 when the report showed it was a lot better to build there than on Location 1.

The *Political Feud Story*, as a story about actors in favor of one location and against another, involves friends and enemies who have been opposed for a long time.[14] The setting is the political arena during the last 15 years or more. Important events are the fights that took place in the 1990s over the center planning and the failure of the Center Vision as a defeat for the advocates of Location 1. Although the leader of the Liberals and some others played an important role as actors, alderman Koehoorn is the central character. In this version of the Center Story alderman Koehoorn is not a rational specialist, but a supporter of Location 2. Various actors in Heart-less Town told me that everybody knew that the alderman had been a supporter of Location 2 all along. Moreover, the organizers of the campaign that helped him to obtain a seat in the council were known supporters of Location 2. Although this alleged identity of the alderman as a supporter of Location 2 was seen as a reality, it is never talked about in public debates. This view even led some, although they lacked the proof, to suggest that it was not unlikely that a local group of influential advocates of Location 2 put the alderman on the board to build a center on Location 2.

The Feud Story, as a hidden version of the Center Story, sheds another light on the Back-To-Basics Story. In the Back-To-Basics Story alderman Koehoorn comes in like a savior. He himself does not want to draw the attention to his person, but the way he presents the new way of doing (objective, rational) makes his acts appear suspicious to the various actors involved. The Back-To-Basics Story is suspicious not because of the method it proposes, but because of the person who proposes it. Various actors seemed to have a hard time believing in the neutrality that the alderman proclaimed. Re-doing the location decision, a decision that had already been taken twice during the 1990s, now looked like a way to get Location 2 back in the picture. Deciding first on the size of the center looked like a way to rule out the possibility of building on Location 1. The big question, of course, became whether alderman Koehoorn had steered the process in favor of Location 2.[15] As one of his political enemies said: "The first thing I said when I heard that Koehoorn would become alderman was 'well, then we will build on Location 2'." Interview respondents described the alderman not only as an expert who worked at a very high level in the world of big planning projects, but also as a sly person who knows exactly what he wants. To those who believe and use this version of the Center Story the issue is more than a fight in which a compromise can be made. It is a case of all or nothing.

This critical view of the way the proposal of the board was received shows some of what is hidden and stays hidden in the process. While a board member complained about the way alderman Koehoorn kept the center planning to himself for a long time, and council members complained that the working agreement with the entrepreneurs and the project developer could not be changed at all once the council was confronted with it, from the position of the alderman these events could be explained with the need to convince stakeholders at the negotiation table. Later on, it was also a way to safeguard what was reached after long hours of bargaining. The only way to keep as many parties as possible more or less happy seemed to combine managing, bargaining and making a vision. In Heart-less Town actors referred to this as playing chess on many boards at the same time. But the unsolved mystery surrounding the alderman and a proposal that was highly ambiguous made it understandable how Termaat, new in the council and not even a party leader, could have success with a new proposal that ignored both Locations 1 and 2. Choosing Location 3 made sure those in favor of Location 2 did not get what they have wanted for so many years. Choosing Location 3 presented a Solomon's judgment that could end a long feud once and for all.

With the political parties radically opposed just before the final council meeting, a deadlock seemed to be in the making. In the end a final twist provided a way out. It turned the final meeting into a simpler *Political Fight Story* about the board and those who were against it. The board made use of its own power in the political game. Already before the final meeting, it claimed that the council should not make its own proposal. That did not work. The setting and the events that were relevant were reduced as much as possible to what had been going on – planning efforts and debates - during the new planning period. Just like in the version of the Center Story in which a political feud takes place, the board framed the center issue as an issue in which the governing itself was problematic. The managerial story of governing is also of importance, since the board argued that the local authority should show decisiveness. The board had taken responsibility for the center issue and demanded loyalty from those affiliated with them. The board had investigated, deliberated and tried to satisfy all. Using the threat to resign, the board successfully pushed the possible guilt for not being able to end the never-ending story in the direction of the political parties in the coalition. While two parties followed the board's proposal from the beginning, three more council members of the Christian Democrats swayed. A second political crisis in two years was not something they wanted to be responsible for. It might have endangered the autonomy of the town itself. The political story of governing in which actors force a victory through their authority, together with a managerial story aimed at being decisive, turned the board and the alderman into winners.

Hidden Meanings: A Heart without Citizens?

If we look at the criteria the board established to come to its decision, one criterion is left out of the Location Report: societal support. In the view of the board this criterion was impossible to establish in the same way as the other, more or less technical criteria. The board labeled societal support as something the board members had to gain insight into itself. Opportunities to gain a sort of ‘measurement,’ in the form of a referendum or a survey to find out which location had the most support among the citizens, were not used. Discussions in and around the meetings of the council committee did not lead to a clear establishment of the way societal support should be seen either.

Nevertheless, the board claimed to put much energy into finding out about the societal support. Meetings with citizens and representatives of segments of society were organized and a sounding board was created where a small group of citizens came together on several occasions. However, during all these kinds of meetings, alderman Koehoorn and colleagues never asked whether the actors present supported one or another location. In addition, meetings with the public were divided into one-way communication (with members of civil society) and two-way communication (with residents of the areas of five locations). As in the political story of governing, the local authority sent messages out to the general public. Only the members of civil society wearer, to some extent, considered partners for conversation and consultation. A small ‘public’ vote nevertheless took place on the sounding board, on the initiative of one of its members.[16] Was the result of this vote, a big majority for Location 1, the kind of event the alderman feared?

Another finding can be added here. Some time after the Location Report was published, a Communication Report was also published. This Communication Report, containing the minutes of the meetings the alderman, on behalf of the board, had with representatives, did not play a big role in the debate. Its introduction, written after the meetings had taken place, did however include interesting acts of sense making on the part of the board. This introduction ends with the curious statement that those leading the communication meetings at the locations had noticed that ‘people react on the basis of facts. They eliminate a number of locations and make conclusions that are the most logical for them. From the attitudes in the audience it could be concluded that Location 2 can be seen as an obvious location.’ When I asked the person who led all except one meeting, he told me not to have made that statement.[17] So, at a certain point the board helps the citizens to tell a short story about the obvious connection between the Back-To-Basics Story (the facts) and Location 2.

Building societal support for the board, however, seems primarily to mean explaining what the board is doing, not finding out which location had a preference among people with whom the board comes into contact. Even though alderman Koehoorn said that the board ‘registers’ everything that is said, it remains unclear what was done with the registrations and what relation this had to the support for various locations. Once the board had made its decision and defended it in public, the criterion of societal support changed to the lack of 'societal protest' that the board had experienced since announcing its decision.[18] A lack of protest, in its turn, might have to do with a public that thinks protesting does not lead to anything. As presented in a quote in a regional newspaper, the reaction of the president of the football club about Location 2 can be seen as a sign of it: '…the discussion [about the center] has been going on for so long that we cannot do anything about it anymore. It has no use going into the streets with banners….' In addition, when residents living close to Location 3 sent letters of protest, the new criterion (societal protest) became one of the reasons why Location 2 was argued to be better than Location 3. At the same time the status of the criterion seemed to be slightly altered. In answer to questions the Liberals posed, societal support was called a 'touchstone,' to which the board added it 'has also taken its own decisions and administrative responsibilities,'

The ambiguity that surrounds the criterion of societal support comes in handy for the board. This is despite and, in part, the result of the difficulties the members of the board, and those working for them, had in making societal support concrete. It not only prevented possible support for Location 1 from surfacing at the moment that Location 2 proved to be the most feasible, but it also helped to evade the question of support for a center in general. In contrast to the ambiguity in the board's proposal, the board got away with this almost without protest. After being in Heart-less Town a while, I heard a story about the center planning that created an outlook on what the local authority had been doing that differed substantially from the stories put forward in this case study up until now. What could be called a *Blind Politics Story* tells us that while politicians have been busy with the center's planning for a long time, the citizens lost their interest in the issue a long time ago. Many citizens do not want a big center, but the politicians do not want to listen. From this story it might be concluded that only the actors in, and closely around, local politics believe the stories about a town that needs a heart and a local authority that has a chance to help give it one. If it were up to the citizens, it would be just fine to give the small center at Location 1 a new look.

Of course, the citizens' cynicism was already part of the Center Story. The difference in this version of the Center Story, however, is that according to the Blind Politics Story the whole center planning activity had lost its legitimacy. The citizens were no longer the suffering actors. The problem was not that the board and council were incapable of making decisions and implementing them, the problem was that the local authority was doing things the citizens were not interested in. As one of the civil servants said to me in an interview: "Why is the center such a big problem here? Because nobody wants it, only politics wants it."[19] When the question about the absence of the voice of the citizens was raised during the process, alderman Koehoorn argued that citizens no longer wanted one particular location, just as long as a center was built *somewhere*. It is hardly coincidental that the Back-To-Basics Story, in which the municipality suffers under the indecisiveness and incompetence of past boards and councils, is built around this reasoning. It is also in line with the managerial story of governing, where decisiveness and expertise are the most important features of a local authority. The conclusion can be that, although the board invoked a participatory version of the consensus story, it actually held onto its own managerial story. A political story that gives the board the authority to determine what is important in Heart-less Town is also in use, as can be seen in the somewhat paternalistic effort to inform the public and the use of its possible preference only as a touchstone – although it remains unclear if and how the last thing is done. The citizens are most of all the audience to what is going on in the interpretive process.

Political parties in the council did not do a lot to uncover the *Blind Politics Story* either. This is perhaps because it does not only put the board in a bad light, it also contradicts the heart stories and legitimacy of the work that all political parties have invested over the years to solve the problem of a town without a heart. As it turns out, the stories about looking for a metaphorical heart, in a town that is divided and with an administration that is solving all these problems, work to hide other stories featuring those who do not care and those who like the center as it is.[20] The discussion about the location using the notion of the heart helps to divert attention from the necessity of the center in general. The idea that Heart-less Town has no heart and should have one is the unquestioned starting point of the debate. Accepting the notion of a heart substitutes the question of public support for one of the locations. I mean, how could anyone protest against the noble ambition to create a heart? Does it not point naturally to something that is shared by a community? In the political setting the need for a new center is not a question, it is taken for granted. The only political party that doubted the need for a center during the decision-making process was the new party: Combative Town. They took the point of view of the citizens. This is not very surprising, since this party was the only one that did not have a long-term commitment to the center. The blindness of the politicians, however, did not make the Blind Politics Story invisible.

A short anecdote will illustrate the point. In a survey among citizens for a project directed at cutting budgets (see next chapter) in April 2004, a month before the decision on the center, the respondents were asked to name issues that they saw as appropriate municipal cut-backs. Although the respondents were *explicitly* asked not to name ‘one-time projects like the development of the center or the development of new housing,’ 42 respondents (534 surveys sent and a total response of 45 %) mention the center planning as a possible cut anyway. Next to the appearance of the Blind Politics Story in interviews and conversations, and the doubts that were raised during some meetings, this anecdote can be seen as an illustration of the ‘reality’ politicians do not want to hear about. In light of the meanings that can be attributed to the extensively used heart metaphor, the Blind Politics Story paints a dark picture of governing in Heart-less Town. The only activity and the only emotions that really mattered in the public sense making about the center planning were those in and around the politics (in its narrow sense). Most political actors in Heart-less Town were so convinced of the need for a center that they took the legitimacy of the planning effort totally for granted, making elaborate deliberation superfluous.

Table 5.1: Overview of Practice Stories in the Center Case

Practice Story	Setting (time and space)	Events	Entities and 'meanings center'	Collective Act Connected
Center	Last 10-30 years municipality	Efforts to create center fail	Politicians, Locations 1 and 2, inhabitants, entrepreneurs, Center, 'heart'	Creating a new center
Back-to-Basics	Present (now or never), shopping area	Center Vision failed, shops are closing	Consumers, entrepreneurs, specialists, reports, facts, shops, D.N.A., numbers, 'shopping center'	First one of 5, later Location 2
Heart-as-Life	Future (30-100 years), center area	The present center is dying	Old dying center, Future town, vibrant center, 'heart-as-life'	Location 3
Heart-as-Love	Past (30 years), municipality	Growing love for old center, creation of the Center Vision	Community, identity, 'heart-as-love'	Location 1
Political Feud	Past, political arena	Fights 1990s, failure of Center Vision	Enemies and friends, Koehoorn as supporter of Location 2	Location 1 or 2
Political Fight	Present, political arena, backstage	Fights during new period (board's threat)	Interests, board vs. council, entrepreneurs	Location 1 (later 3) or 2
Blind Politics	Present	Citizens lost interest	Stubborn politicians, citizen as audience, 'no real issue'	No new center

5.4 The Culture of the Case

Now, at the end of this chapter, it is time to look back at the ways actors made sense of the issue at hand, and at the ways stories of governing were used to do this. The practice stories that were used in the case can be found in *Table 5.1*.

The Interpretive Process

The Center Story indicated some *initial meanings* available in this case. It all seemed quite simple. Heart-less Town is a town that lacks a center. Although various efforts were made to create a plan for the center and implement it, these efforts failed. A new alderman and his colleagues started the interpretive process framing the problem through a partial version of the Center Story. The alderman suggested going *back-to-basics*, connecting the meaning of the center issue primarily to the idea of an inadequate shopping center and problematic decision making of the past. Enacting this meaning with the use of the rational planning, as depicted in the managerial story of governing, the alderman tried to limit the possible solutions to those which could be proven feasible. The new center should be first of all 'economically viable.' The characteristics of such a center were defined with the help of planning agencies. The alderman constructed an opposition between governing through emotions and daydreams, an attack on the political story of governing, and governing through reason and feasibility, an appraisal of the managerial story of governing. He also tried to create a sense of urgency, saying that 'it's now or never.' Taken together, the alderman set out to look for realistic solutions based on reliable knowledge and asked the politicians to move forward quickly, and not to look back. Setting the old planning apart from the new planning, the past from the present and the future, made it possible to tell a story of hope.

New entities and categories for entities were also introduced. Introducing three locations was used in order to draw attention away from the previous battle between two locations. It was meant to depoliticize the location choice. The locations were attributed a D.N.A., stressing their similarity and promoting them as physical objects that could be measured. This downplayed their particular historical meaning. The specialists from planning agencies became capable of judging the suitability of the locations and thus replaced the politicians. At the same time, a distinction was made between many attributes of a location that could be measured in a straightforward manner and one attribute - societal support for locations among the citizens - that could not be measured that way. In addition, meetings with the public were divided into one-way communication (with members of civil society) and two-way communication (with residents of the areas of five locations).

Although the alderman's reports and speeches alderman had already invoked various meanings of a center, most of all in the board and in the council committee for public space, other stories came (back) into the picture. The complicated metaphor 'a center is a heart' started to gain a more prominent place in the sense making. The idea that what was needed was a heart for the town seemed to be something all agreed on. In the eyes of the board members more negotiation and a compromise according to a consensus story of governing seemed to be needed with the help of the idea of a center-as-a-heart. The board then tried to integrate the past, as captured in the *Heart-as-love* Story, with the present and the future, caught as the *Heart-as-life* Story in one proposal. The proposal was an ambiguous meaning construct in which various practice stories and stories of governing were integrated. An 'organic link' between the two locations, that was part of the proposal, was meant to consolidate past and future, opposing groups in local politics and a managerial (rational) and a political (emotional) choice. The board's proposal did, however, involve choosing one of the two locations that were popular in the 1990s, which made it controversial. Alternatively, one politician used the results of the rational acts in order to formulate a strong vision of a lively center, using the *heart-as-life* notion to the maximum. The center planning, according to him, stretched further into the future (not 30 years like the board said, but 100 years). The idea of an objective best choice (the forensic effort of rational planning had that in stock by then) had already become problematic for the various actors involved. The *political feud* of the 1990s was for a long time a hidden all-or-nothing battle between advocates of two different locations. It could now be revived. This specific version of the political story of governing shed a different light on the case. Consensus among most actors and successful reframing now seemed implausible. At this stage the practice stories become more and more directed at the interpretive process itself. The *final meanings* of the issue then include the meanings of the local authority itself. The interpretive process was about the interpretive process. The problem was governing itself and not just which location was better. At the last moment the board overcame the problem, but not without turning the meaning of what was going on into an issue of problematic decision making again. Only this time it was not only a rational solution that offered the way out for a board that was afraid of appearing indecisive, but also the political power to end a *political fight* between those in favor of the board's proposal and those against it.

Stories of Governing

In conclusion, the use of stories of governing can be addressed separately.The sense making in this first case started with general initial meanings. There is an important consensus for the need for a center among those in politics. The alderman first tried to limit the sense making to that which was feasible and what was provable, and created a sense of urgency. These all reflect the managerial story of governing. At the same time stories of governing were opposed in an effort to construct a new planning reality. This shows how one story of governing can be used to gain support for another one. A political-emotional past was constructed and compared with a rational-professional present and future. The struggle of meaning became more hectic when, in accordance with the political story of governing, the meanings of the center became more diverse and the settings grew. Following the perceived need to come to some sort of compromise and consensus that can be found in the consensus story, the board pursued two courses of sense making. They tried to integrate practice stories on the one hand, and the political story and managerial story on the other hand. By contrast, a political outsider, inspired by the political story of governing, proposed choosing a political vision over calculations. He did this when he proposed a more radical solution. In the end the uses of a political story in terms of a feud between supporters of the two main locations and a fight between the board and some parties in the council demonstrate how much sense making might become a reflection of the political game. The political battlefield clearly produced winners and losers.

In order to change and control meanings, all three stories of governing were used normatively and were descriptive. The consensus story, however, was only used in a restricted way. Although a strong consensus was available among the politicians based on the need to do *something*, the question of whether there was support for a certain location and for the center planning among the citizens was hidden. Invoking the consensus story when talking about societal support did not help to hide the way in which the board in the final stages held on to a managerial and a political story of governing. The citizens were mostly reduced to an audience. The question that remains is whether this means there has been a case of *blind politics* in which consensus among the politicians for the need of a heart for the town blinded them from the possibility that citizens did not want a center at all. As Edelman (1967, see quote at the beginning of Section 5.3) said, a metaphor – in this case 'a center is like a heart' - might highlight what the actors in politics wanted to see and avoid the attention being drawn to alternative ways of looking at what is going on.

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[1] Part of a letter sent to the head of the municipal council, the party leaders and the local newspaper just after the municipal elections in 2002. The italics were added.

[2] According to a short internal memo on the change.

[3] Among these prominent members are also the then former mayor mentioned before and a member of the citizen's protest organization against the last plans on Location 1.

[4] According to the alderman, in the end the interest of all stakeholders 'in the chain' (from project developer to consumer) will be served.

[5] According to the administration it was not possible to organize a referendum because the case is a one-time event.

[6] Later on it shows that not all entrepreneurs are happy with the board's decision. According to the actors I interviewed those entrepreneurs who own an establishment at Location 1 are not happy with the decision, since the value of their property might drastically diminish.

[7] This project concerned a train track between Rotterdam and the German border. The national (scientific and political) debate is still going on.

[8] Later on in the process the credibility of the report becomes even more suspect when somebody notices that on their website the planning agency argues to work for the project developer in the first place. Although the planning agency claims the website has not been updated, the damage is done.

[9] That these locations were added for this reason was said in interviews with those involved in the new planning. In interviews the three additional locations were sometimes referred to as sort of dummies.

[10] Other projects on town planning in the Netherlands also use the imagery of a center as a heart as I found out during the research and after. In the second municipality I visited, the metaphor was also in use. In addition, as Van Eeten (1999) showed, the 'Green Heart' (the name of an area between various big Dutch cities) as a metaphor has played an important role in Dutch planning at the national level. The center as a 'living room' is another metaphor that is used in Heart-less Town, but only scarcely.

[11] Even though the actors used the metaphor all of the time, those actors in Heart-less Town with whom I discussed an earlier version of this chapter had not realized the possible meanings behind it.

[12] Although the board claimed that Location 1 should not be seen as the heart of Heart-less Town, it argued to 'have attention for the emotional perception of Location 1 as the center from a historical perspective.'

[13] As the Labor spokesman says in one of the meetings, politicians do not want to try to realizing something that will never materialize (*aan een dood paard trekken*).

[14] One of the actors who worked on the Center Vision together with a politician, told me that after the Center Vision failed, he had for a long time showed explicit signs of friendship in public. Working on Center Vision had made friends of them.

[15] This question however is not one I am able to answer. What is interesting is to see how the idea that he might want to do that triggers others to be suspicious towards the location report and the board's proposal.

[16] The members are a group of volunteers.

[17] At the one meeting he did not attend I was present myself and have not heard anything that would lead to the statement in the introduction either.

[18]

[19] Another civil servant added that those interested in it are interested in it for economical motives.

[20] Although the first report, that 'proves' the need for a center is mostly based in the logic of 'costumer needs' and not, for example, in the language of 'societal needs,' its combination with the idea of creating a heart is strong enough to hide the center as a place that has to be built by people who in one way or the other earn money doing this.

6 What Matters Most

Se non è vero, è bien trovato[1]

A civil servant in Heart-less Town

6.1 Introducing the Case

This second case study examines an interpretive process that developed while I was getting ready to do fieldwork in Heart-less Town. In the first section of the previous chapter a short introduction to the municipality of Heart-less Town can be found. This chapter's first section examines the first meeting that signaled the beginning of the collective sense making. The second section of this case study chronologically retells what happened after this meeting. The third section analyzes the process using the idea of storytelling as the way actors make sense. The final section reviews the sense making.

A Kick-Off Conference

On 15 November 2003 a group of council members, board members and civil servants got together in a conference accommodation just outside Heart-less Town. The conference, which lasted all day, was meant to be the 'kick-off' of a Core Tasks Debate.[2] The debate was triggered by the unexpected appearance of a deficit in the yearly municipal budget of 1.8 million Euros. According to the letter of invitation that the board sent out, 'the adjustments that have to be made in the financial housekeeping[3] are of such a magnitude that a reconsideration of core business is necessary.'. In addition to the immediate need for a Core Tasks Debate, the letter indicated that the local authority recently discovered that it had to reorient itself in the local society and the region. The first issue was referred to as a financial necessity and the second as strategic relevance.

In the board's initial plan for the Core Tasks Debate it stated that, in principle, a strategic discussion about reorientation would precede a Core Tasks Debate. However, because the financial problem came to the awareness before and was urgent, the Core Tasks Debate would come first. It would not only serve the purpose of 'coming to a reliable and balanced financial housekeeping, but also of boosting choices regarding the strategic positioning of the municipality Heart-less Town.' In the letter of invitation, the members of the board added that the rich debate they wanted should not just lead to reaching the financial target, but also to a qualitative improvement of the way the municipality functioned. In addition, they stated that communication, participation and support, involving actors both inside and outside the town hall, would be of importance during the debate.

For the conference the board invited all the members of the council, and the management of the local bureaucracy, including all department heads. The organization of the conference had been in the hands of alderman Hoekstra, who was in charge of the Core Tasks Debate; the head of the financial department, Verstraten; and, interim chief executive Gerrits, who started to work in the municipality after the administrative crisis before the summer of 2003 (see *Section 5.1*). Combative Town, the new party that came into the opposition after the crisis, refused to come. It argued that a meeting like the conference, should be public and, especially in times of financial problems, in a cheaper place.

During the first part of the conference various actors gave a presentation in which they outlined their way of looking at the debate. What stood out was a short discussion about the goal of the Core Tasks Debate. This took place between alderman Hoekstra and Gillemans, the leader of Liberals. In the alderman's view there was too much thinking in the short term. He felt the debate should focus on things that are more fundamental than the financial matter. Gillemans did not agree, arguing that the goal of the debate was to cut 1.8 million Euros. A visiting university professor in Public Administration told those present that a core tasks debate is about the question of what the actors deem important as a municipality.[4] Behind that question a more fundamental discussion can be found about the kind of municipality that actors want. The actors involved could see the municipality as an enterprise, as a hierarchical organization, as a political institute or as a local community (see *Chapter 2, Section 2.4* and Ringeling (2004)). The local authority should therefore think about the kinds of roles it can and wants to play.

During the afternoon, politicians and civil servants, first in groups and at the end in a plenary session, discussed the various roles the local authority of Heart-less Town could play and the tasks it could fulfill. The members of the local authority also talked about the position of the municipality in the region. Various issues seemed important. On the one hand, the mayor of Heart-less Town would be leaving in half a year, which raised the question of succession. On the other hand, Heart-less Town had developed a document called *Development Vision 2015*. In this document, carrying the motto 'Heart-less Town, Strong in Itself,' the municipality described its position as relatively independent. Since the provincial authority had shown its discontent with this reorientation, the local authority would have to change its point of view. The latest news was that the day before the conference a delegation of politicians had a meeting with the Queen's Commissioner, the head of the provincial authority. The politicians were told that the municipality was up for amalgamation and, therefore, there would be, for now, no new mayor for Heart-less Town.

At the end of the day alderman Hoekstra and the head of the local bureaucracy proposed that, for the period to come, three discussion groups would be formed to work on different aspects of the debate. There would be a group that was called *Vision* which would take the Development Vision 2015 into account and work on the roles and tasks of the local authority. A second group would focus on the *Preconditions and Criteria* that would have to be taken into account during the debate. A final group, called *Communication and Interaction,* would develop a plan for communication about the debate. This was in order to gain support inside the local bureaucracy and in the local society.

6.2 There's a Hole in the Budget

Working in Groups I

In the period after the conference the various groups got together at various times. The Vision group, on which interim Gerrits and the leaders of the parties participated, focused upon the important decisions. The group first talked about the *Development Vision Heart-less Town 2015*. The policy document, referring to Heart-less Town as an independent municipality, would be changed in order to make clear that the municipality would, in the future, direct its attention to the municipalities that surrounded it. The members, however, did not want to lose the connotation of a strong Heart-less Town. The result was that in the new policy document the municipality said it would aim for 'a (strong) Heart-less Town in a strong region.'

After the abstract debate on the vision, the group discussed how to deal with the financial problem. The civil servants and a hired consultant proposed to use a decision-making method that is called 'zero-based budgeting.' They explained that the method works in the following way: first the budget of all products under consideration is set at zero percent. Then the stakeholders, in this case the political parties, say what percentage they want returned for each individual product. The head of the local bureaucracy convinced the politicians that it was important to have some nerve at the present stage, because there would always be a chance to be more nuanced later on. Politicians, according to the interim chief executive Gerrits, tend to back out when tough decisions have to be made. After a discussion among the members of the group, in which some politicians thought the zero-based budgeting method was too technocratic and others argued that not making decisions now meant putting decision making off, the group decided to use it. Furthermore, a final decision was that the local authority should take on the role of 'facilitator.'[5]

The group on Communication and Interaction talked about the different ways that the public could be involved in the debate. Apart from using the regular modes of communication like the website and the local newspaper, someone proposed to explain the financial measures to citizens at the market and in the shopping center. This idea, however, did not get enough support. What did get the support needed was the idea to organize a survey among the citizens to find out what they valued most. What would be done with the results of this survey, however, remained to be seen. The group on Preconditions and Criteria developed a discussion document, but this did not lead to concrete actions.

A Second Conference

During the second half of January 2004 the council members all got a list of products for which the municipality had a budget that it could decide upon. Not all products qualified for cutting, because many of them belonged to tasks that the local authority was legally required to 'produce.' The political parties were told to do what was referred to as the 'exercise': give scores to products on the product list. On February 13, a second general meeting was organized to discuss the outcome of the exercise.

At four o'clock, halfway through the afternoon of a normal working day, the meeting started. Almost all the politicians, including the members of Combative Town, and heads of departments were present. In the meeting room, a clear separation was made between the politicians and the civil servants. The politicians were sitting in an inner circle, while the civil servants formed a sort of audience sitting around them. The head of the bureaucratic organization and a consultant chaired the meeting. At the beginning of the meeting the party leaders had the opportunity to give their opinion. Some of them drew attention to the fact that not all of the political parties had proposed substantial cuts. The opposition parties proposed the biggest cuts. Two of the four coalition partners were accused of having put minimal effort into 'finding money.' A short debate developed about the intention of the scores the council members filled in. The two coalition parties were accused of interpreting the numbers they had to fill in as the relative importance they gave to a certain product, and they gave 150 points to some products they found very important. The other parties took the numbers more to stand for a concrete budget reserved for products, and never exceeded 100.[6]

Various actors voiced their criticism of the Core Tasks Debate. One of the council members feared that the process would end up adopting the method of 'cheese slicing' products without really making decisions. Using the method of cheese slicing in the Dutch context means that the budgetary cuts would be done in such a way that a bit of money would be taken from all products. According to one of the interview respondents, this was what happened some years before the local authority organized a debate on core tasks. The result of that debate was generally seen as poor. Another council member said it was too early to make any decisions because there should first be a debate. The product list and the debate, according to him, seemed to represent two different worlds. Another member of the same party had the idea that during the first meeting of the Core Tasks Debate there was a 'we' working together that also included the local bureaucracy. Although 'we' would have an open debate, the present situation reminded one more of Russian roulette. Interim Gerrits responded to the criticism and said that decisions were not yet made. The method was being used to calculate rough differences. The board would subsequently investigate the possibilities of executing the cuts. Various party leaders argued that it was important that the money that was needed come from efficiency cuts in the administrative organization, as well as for instance, through increasing the number of productive work hours.[7] After the party leaders had given their opinions, the results of the workshops that were held in the period before the conference were discussed.

A presentation by interim leader Gerrits and the consultant supporting him followed a short break. Gerrits sketched three scenarios. The scenarios were developed in the financial department and all involved a certain way of interpreting the results of the exercise. It became apparent that the money needed was not the 1.8 million Euros that were talked about at a previous stage in the discussions, but 3.5 million Euros (later changed to 3.2 million). According to Gerrits this had to do with a difference between gross and net amounts. The central question now seemed to be about how the results should be interpreted in order to make sufficient budget cuts.

The council members agreed with one of the scenarios Gerrits presented: for every product the result would be determined by taking the average of the percentages the council members attributed to it. Whenever the result was less than 75 percent of the original (later changed to 70 percent), the product (or at least the part that involved no legal obligation) would be cut all together. Products above the 75 percent line would be kept in principal. The scores the two coalition parties had given that were over 100 were set to 100. In a second round of workshops, the practical possibility and social consequences of cutting products were investigated, leading up to a proposal the board made to the council. In addition, Gerrits promised that the management team would look into the possibilities of realizing substantive cuts in the organization. Finally, he said that management would investigate the possibility of lowering the costs of those municipal tasks that were legally obligatory. Alderman Hoekstra told the audience in his concluding speech that the consensus was surprisingly large. The meeting ended a lot earlier than expected.

Working in Groups II

The results of the second meeting were formalized at a council meeting six days later. The board interpreted the decision to formalize the results of the second conference in a way that meant the board would '*investigate* the possibility of making the cuts' that were decided upon. In a discussion between the leader of the Liberals, Gillemans, and alderman Hoekstra of the Core Tasks Debate, the alderman demanded space for the board to use its own judgment in order to associate some products on the basis of the board's political program and developments that had already been under way. According to Hoekstra the board had its own responsibility within the boundaries that the council set. The board would have to take into account whether making a particular cut was feasible and whether it was consistent with developments that were already taking place. The board also wanted to find out what the possible effects to society were or might be, as well as consequences to the workforce from particular cuts. Although Gillemans complained that the alderman should do what the council told him to do, the conditions under which the board wished to work were accepted.

After the council meeting a new round of discussions was organized in groups. This time there were five groups. Three new groups were called *Administration and Means*, *Public Space*, and *Society*, following the political-institutional division in politics and the local bureaucracy. Two aldermen and the mayor each chaired one of these groups in which anticipated cuts and their societal effects were discussed. For the new groups 'expert citizens' were requested to join. The political parties themselves helped look for these citizens. However, just one of these expert citizens was found, and the groups thus consisted mainly of politicians and civil servants. In the case of subsidies granted to stakeholders in society, representatives of those stakeholders were asked to visit the discussion group to explain what was done with the money their organization received from the municipality. The groups formulated their advice to the board regarding every product they discussed. With the long list of products and the meetings starting at eight o' clock in the evening, both politicians and civil servants worked until late at the town hall.

A fourth group, called *Process Guidance*, consisted of party leaders, two board members and management team of the bureaucratic organization. This group monitored and discussed the overall progress and the contributions of individuals to it. In some cases it took serious measures to make sure the Core Tasks Debate met its targets. On various occasions this group made clear to the other groups working on the products that they should not make political decisions. The final group, a continuation of the *Communication and Interaction*, supervised an agency from outside the municipality in the design and execution of the survey among citizens of the municipality. In total 1200 citizens were sent surveys and 534 responded. In the survey the respondent was told that his opinion 'is of importance to gain insight on what should be cut in the coming years. The municipal administration does have ideas on what issues it could cut, but we [the municipal administration] want the results of the survey to weigh in heavily in the decision making.'[8] How the administration was going to take the survey into account was unclear to the members of the Communication and Interaction group.[9] An envisioned group focusing on the roles of the local authority did not materialize. The members of Process Guidance doubted the usefulness of this group and decided that meetings planned would be cancelled for the moment.

While new groups discussed cuts on specific products there were other acts undertaken. The management and the board invested time in thinking about a way to cut the overhead of the local bureaucracy. The board made the decision that a number of civil servants had to be laid off. The workforce of the local bureaucracy was divided between those employees who should have been gone a long time before, those who could go on early retirement, those who only have a temporary contract, and finally those to whom the lay-off did not apply. According to management some investments had to be made in order to achieve the right situation for the workforce. In other words, some employees should be paid to leave. Two civil servants worked on a benchmarking operation that included several bureaucratic organizations. This was done to gain insight into the level of overhead in the various departments of the local bureaucracy.

A Report

In May 2004 the board got together outside the municipality over two days to discuss the budgetary proposals on individual products and to prepare a new proposal. The board members, supported by a new Chief Officer who replaced Gerrits, and the civil servants of the financial department, assessed one by one the cuts proposed by the council along with advice from the discussion groups Administration and Means, Public Space, and Society. At this point the board wanted to turn the separate cuts that the council proposed into a coherent proposal. The board members reached a decision about many of the cuts quite easily. Some politically more sensitive issues were discussed at greater length.

After the board's sessions, civil servants from the financial department and alderman Hoekstra composed the proposal in the form of a report. The report was called *Choosing and Connecting*.[10] In the first section of the report, the board pointed to the financial deficit as the motive for the cuts in their proposal, and they argued for the need for 'radical adjustments.' In the sections that follow the board gave much attention to the agreements made with the council about the rules of the Core Tasks Debate, and to various policy documents that the board took into account. The policy documents referred to are the Development Vision 2015, the coalition program of the board for the period 2002-2006 with four main objectives (social cohesion, livability, sustainability and a trustworthy/reliable government), the vision on administrative and organizational development, and a vision on *Welfare Policies* developed in the bureaucratic organization. While the development vision argued for solving problems at the regional level, the vision on administrative and organizational development added that citizens should get more space and more responsibility.

Although the description of the core tasks debate contained little explanation of the zero-based budgeting method, there was a long list of preconditions and criteria that the board took into account. The results of the survey among citizens, which were used as a touchstone, were also described and shown in the form of a graph that indicated the satisfaction and importance that citizens have attributed to specific products. In addition, the board notified the reader that the cuts had to total 2.8 to 2.9 million Euros as a result of a lowering of state funds received by the municipality. The second part of the report contained, first, a description of the costs of the products for which cuts were proposed and the possible societal consequences of these cuts. Second, the reasoning of the discussion group and the board for proposing a cut or renouncing one was given in some cases. In most cases the board followed the reasoning of one of the three discussion groups. The advice on many of the products was to make them 'cost-effective.' After the report was published the cuts became news items at various points in time.

Meetings that Follow

Despite the board's proposal being on the agenda, the council meeting at the end of June was relatively quiet. The seats for the public were mostly filled with civil servants,[11] while there were only two or three interested stakeholders from outside the town hall. In addition to the political finalization of the center planning (see *Chapter 5*) at the end of the previous month, and the farewell of the mayor, there might have been another reason for a lack of attendance at the council meeting: the Dutch football team was playing in the semi-finals of the European Championship in Portugal.[12]

During the meeting the leader of the Liberals, Gillemans, showed her discontent with the procedure being followed. According to her, an incomplete group of Process Guidance members – only three of the six political leaders - had decided that the general public could wait to respond to the proposed cuts until after the council had already decided on them. In addition, she was unhappy that the period for responding would coincide with the summer holidays. An earlier arrangement in a better attended Process Guidance session had been that the period for response would start four weeks before the council meeting.[13] The leaders of the opposition parties showed their discontent by reading the newspaper during the meeting (Combative Town) and by not taking part in the discussion at all (Liberals). The leader of the Labor party complained about the lack of vision, arguing that a larger frame should be taken into account because…

> […] Worldwide a new neo-liberal thinking is visible, through which all governments, whether they are local, national or international, have come under pressure to redraw themselves from the public sector. This is what you more or less also see in the vision that is sketched here. More and more is left to the forces of the market. Government redraws and limits itself to facilitation, and supply and demand just have to find each other. […] Once this process is in motion it is hard to steer it because government has lost its steering instruments. [Government] has to focus on bringing people together and stimulating them, but these are not hard instruments that enable enforcement. That is why we plead that the "roles" [of the municipality, as envisioned before but canceled later on] group will determine the concrete policy fields and whether government at a distance is desirable […].

There was, however, no support for this line of thought. At the end of the meeting a new policy document, called *Vision on Welfare Policies,* was discussed. Civil servants from the department for Societal Matters had developed this policy document in order to turn the proposed cuts into a substantive vision.[14] A majority of the council members (Liberals excluded) supported the idea to further develop the vision in an interactive process with the citizens.

After the meeting the period for official response to the board's proposal, which had now also become the 'policy intentions' of the council, began. In order to explain to the public what the board had been up to, it published an overview of the proposed cuts, with an accompanying text, in the local newspaper. In the text, the board argued that it did not propose measures haphazardly. During the period in which the Core Tasks Debate took place, a total of 27 written reactions reached the board and the council. Most of the reactions were sent in the formal period for reaction to plans. The reactions came from foundations, councils and associations. The organization of employees of the local bureaucracy protested against what it called 'an unmotivated if not unfounded' cut of 1.2 million Euros from the staff and management of the local bureaucracy. With one exception, all reactions to the proposal disapproved of a particular budgetary measure or the way the measure was defended. Some of the stakeholders had actually thought about ways to work together with other stakeholders in order to anticipate 'top-down' budget cuts.

In August 2004 the council organized a public hearing on the board's proposals. The council hall was filled with a couple dozen seats, most of which were occupied. According to the minutes of meeting, there were 'around 70 interested citizens, various council and council committee members, a number of civil servants and several members of the board' present.[15] The new mayor chaired the meeting. He made sure that the party leaders did not engage in debates with the speakers, because if that happened the meeting could become endless. Fourteen people registered to address the council. Most of the speakers represented organizations that were to be subjected to big cuts or at least cuts that were substantive for the organization in question. They had already communicated their opinion in written form during the period of formal protest. Although the swimming pool represented one of the products that would suffer the biggest cuts, the head of the swimming pool was not present as a speaker. In the regional newspaper he argued that '[t]he swimming pool is part of the municipality. I am a civil servant, just like my colleagues over here. We are one.' The registered speakers addressed politicians from all parties, mostly the party leaders, who were seated behind a long table. One of the speakers complained about the procedure that was being followed, because the stakeholders were being forced to consider the plans during the summer holidays. According to her, it was convenient to argue that this was done to fit with the planning, but that, she felt, was not very democratic. Another drew a sarcastic picture of the overall procedure:

> If I tell you that you form part of a special council I probably do not tell you anything new. However, the procedure followed for the report Choosing and Coordinating in my view is really out of all proportion. Normally you first formulate your vision on a certain subject, you check this with various target groups (civil society) and next you make a wise decision. Heart-less Town

> does it another way. First, via a football pool (the product list) the financial cuts are established, in the June meeting the council takes a decision. By the way, in this meeting adjustments are still implemented. Subsequently civil society is asked what it thinks about it (even though I do not have the expectation that anything will happen with that), and finally, as a crowning touch, you go and develop a vision for the welfare policy field. In my view through this way of working you put the world on its head.[16]

The new mayor argued, in response, that when the local authority is confronted with measurements of national government there is not always enough time to first develop a vision.

Epilogue

Although the intention was that in October 2004 the new budget for the period 2005-2008 would be presented and the decisions of the *Choosing and Coordinating* would become part of this budget, the process took another turn. Since the civil servants in charge encountered additional financial setbacks amounting to a total of 2.1 million Euros during the preparation of the new budget, the board saw itself forced to look for other ways of cutting costs and postponed the presentation of the new budget. In the local newspaper alderman Hoekstra said that this time the proposals would not be dealt with in an elaborate way, as was the case in *Choosing and Connecting*. 'This time it will be more top-down proposals. Nothing will be left out of consideration.' In a town debate on the topic of the *Welfare Vision* some time later, the mayor admitted that the local authority of Heart-less Town did not have its 'housekeeping book' in order.

Box 6.1: Chronicle of the Core Tasks Debate

2002	March	Municipal Elections
	April	New Board
2003	April-May	Administrative Crisis
	May	New board (Labor replaces Combative Town), New interim head of local bureaucracy
2003	November 15	*Kick-off conference Core Tasks Debate*
	December- (February 2004)	Discussion groups *Vision, Preconditions and Criteria, Communication and Interaction*
2004	February 13	Second Conference
	February 19	Council meeting
	February-May	Discussion groups *Process Guidance, Communication and Interaction, Administration and Means, Public Space, Society*
	May 10,11	Board sessions
	May	Report *Choosing and Connecting* (proposal board)
	June 29	Council meeting on Core Tasks Debate
	July + week 1 Aug	Formal period for response to proposal board
	September	New budgetary deficits are found/ budget is delayed

Even though final decision making was postponed, at the October council meeting the political parties decided on cuts that will be implemented in the next year. The board itself dropped some proposed cuts because of the societal importance of the products involved; it said that this became apparent through the public hearing or the survey among citizens. Moreover, the board said it used a list of 'essential policy issues' to decide on the cuts that were the result of the Core Tasks Debate and the additional cuts later on. Of the handful of amendments that political parties put forward, half of them were unsuccessful. One of representatives of civil society told me that, in the end, the debate was only about isolated products (for an overview of the Core Tasks Debate see *Box 6.1*).

6.3 Making Sense of a Core Tasks Debate

The text [of a budget], written by the collective writer, has basically one main topic: How to economize?

(Czarniawska-Joerges 1992a: 228)

A Debate with a History

The previous section gave an idea of the events that formed the Core Tasks Debate. Now it is possible to look explicitly at the way an issue at stake was put in meaningful contexts in Heart-less Town. In other words, this section looks at the Core Tasks Debate again, but now as an interpretive process in which actors make sense through storytelling (see *Chapter 2*). However, before starting the analysis of the case, I want to involve some of the earlier work on core task debates in the Netherlands. 'Core tasks debate' as an idea has been around for a long time in Dutch politics. At the beginning of the 1990s it was especially *en vogue*. As can be expected, the various meanings that it obtains in Heart-less Town are not new or innovative.

Tracing 'the talk' about core tasks debates at the Dutch national level, Van Twist (1995: chapter 9) argued that there have been four distinctive ways of looking at what a core task debate involves. According to Van Twist's discourse analysis, the first way of approaching a core tasks debate is from a managerial angle. A government should, like a company, decide on its 'core business.' In company language it is more appropriate to talk about 'activities' than about tasks, since when it comes to running a business a private company does not fulfill a role that is defined by those outside of it (In 't Veld 1992). A second approach, developed after the first, was more political. Government and political parties in the first place should rethink the state and the relationship they have with society. A third approach has a more administrative perspective toward things. Although this approach proceeded from the idea that the government should make policy choices, it led to finding out the right way to cut costs and become more efficient. A final approach used the concept to put forward ideas about the need to reorganize government and come to a smaller set of governmental departments. All the ways of looking that Van Twist reconstructed in some form or another can be found in the interpretive process in Heart-less Town. But, more importantly, what we can learn from Van Twist's analysis is that what a core tasks debate is can vary. The no less than four different ways of looking at it also have their consequences for the actions that are linked to it.

Initial Meanings: Three Stories

Even though a core tasks debate was held in the 1990s in Heart-less Town, the issue is relatively new. It is possible to decide on three practice stories that set the stage for the sense making during the period described. The *Budgetary Deficit Story* talks about a municipality that has a hole in the budget. The setting is the municipality as an enterprise. What happened was that the local bureaucracy was working on the budget and discovered increasing expenses that had not yet been covered. The actor that could be attributed a role in finding out about the hole in the budget is the financial department, although this remains vague. The budget of the municipality is an important entity. The managerial story of governing is clearly present in this presentation of the situation.

Two other stories give an alternative view of what is going on. In these the financial problem is a symptom of a larger problem: society is changing and the local authority has not adjusted to these changes. The settings of the *Changing Region Story* and the *Changing Society Story* are the region and the local society, respectively. Although according to the Changing Region Story Heart-less Town did have an orientation towards the future (Development Vision 2015), the events surrounding the crisis on the board and the coming retirement of the mayor led to a situation in which the provincial authority forced the municipality to reorient itself. While other municipalities are important actors, the provincial authority, mostly in the person of the Queen's Commissioner,[17] is the dominant actor and Heart-less Town is seen as the possible victim. The Changing Society Story is about the changes in the relationship between the local authority and the citizens. Actors in this story are the local authority itself, civil society and citizens.

Using the first documents, a plan and a letter of invitation that the board uses to describe the problem, practice stories are put forward and it is argued that they should become part of a 'rich' debate that is not restricted to financial matters. Nevertheless, when the Core Tasks Debate begins the two groups of storytellers that put forward the main stories have a monopoly over the ultimate meaning of the situation in which the municipality finds itself. This was clearly illustrated during the first public setting of the Core Tasks Debate: the kick-off conference. Gillemans, the leader of the Liberals – an opposition party - and the alderman Hoekstra came into conflict over the meaning of the Core Tasks Debate. Gillemans said the problem was a financial one – 1.8 million Euros have to be cut - while alderman Hoekstra argued that the debate should not just be about finances.

Although the first conference had a limited audience, actors in it were more or less united in an abstract debate that focused primarily on the identity of the municipality. Part of this focus can be attributed to role of the university professor. Drawing on the problems that are part of the Changing Local Society and the Changing Region stories and integrating these stories at an abstract level, the stories offer a way through reorientation. To begin with, at the kick-off conference of the Core Tasks debate, a visiting professor tells the actors present that, at a deeper level, the debate about core tasks is a debate about the identity of the municipality. This visiting professor was one of the actors in the national debate on core tasks of central government. Triggering a discussion about the roles and tasks of the municipality he argues for approaching the core task debate from a state-society angle. The Core Tasks Debate should be about a vision on the local authority, its roles and tasks in local society and the region, he tells them.

The act that has to be undertaken to make sense of the situation is a debate on the strategy that the local authority should adopt. This is in line with the argument he and a colleague made (Berg and Ringeling 1992: 90) for a procedure that starts with the 'what' (should we do), followed by a 'how' (should we do it). The setting of this act involves not only the group of actors present at the meeting, but also civil society and other municipalities in the region. The proposal to reorient together with civil society, citizens and other municipalities reflects a consensus story of governing. But more than anything else, the consensus during the meeting is a consensus between actors present at the meeting. What the problem is remains unclear, but that there is a problem is agreed upon. There is also consensus on the need to act together to solve the problem. As it turns out, this consensus is used later on to gain a commitment from the politicians.

Close-The-Gap

Soon after the first conference small discussion groups, which come together at night in the municipal office, replace the setting that had united the limited group of actors at the conference. From that moment on, and in contrast to the normal institutional set-up with its regular meetings every month, many meetings are conducted in which politicians continued to talk about parts of the Core Tasks Debate. These meetings throughout the interpretive process helped to speed up a process that, according to the main actors, would otherwise have taken years. The Vision group, with party leaders, the management of the local bureaucracy and a consultant, take the lead role. If the first conference was informal, with backstage characteristics, this group becomes the backstage for the backstage. In this group the possible separation between the realities of the two practice stories is not concluded, but rather enacted. The Vision group talks first about a new development vision (as the name of the group would suggest), making use of the *Changing Region Story*, and *then* about the way to proceed in taking the budgetary measures discussed. The two stories are not integrated.

At the same time Gerrits takes up the role of main storyteller. A hired consultant assists him in this. Together they replace the university professor in his role. A possible role that the academic and staff have offered as consultant in the Core Tasks Debate never materializes. Gerrits and the consultant stress that the *Budgetary Deficit Story* is the most urgent story that the politicians need to resolve. Part of the problem, they argue, is that making decisions is hard to do for politicians because they want to keep their constituency happy. The typical politician in Heart-less Town is described as an actor who backs out when decisions have to be made. Like this the typical politician of Heart-less Town also becomes the one who can be blamed for the hole in the budget. If politicians started discussing the possible cuts, they would defend their own favorite policies and substantial economizing would be impossible. That is why a method had to be used. It was the only way out of the misery.

Restricting the setting by separating it from the vision debate, creating a sense of urgency and adding two entities to the Budgetary Deficit Story, weak politicians and a method, interim Gerrits constructs the *Close-The-Gap Story*. The Core Tasks Debate is framed as a financial matter of cutting costs. The local authority has to engage in the act of taking economical measures. This is the act that is supposed to bring the process to a happy end. The goal of the core tasks debate with the help of the calculated deficit of 1.8 million Euros becomes tangible. It becomes a clear goal. The decision-making method that is proposed - zero-based budgeting – will help the politicians with weak knees to make decisions. An alternative course of action in which a variety of political visions are proposed and debated at length is in this way side-tracked. The differences of opinion are being depoliticized (Lijphart 1975[1968]) through technique. The tasks that the local authority fulfills –including a large variety of activities that it implements itself as well as activities that it subsidizes - become comparable entities in a general category called 'products.' In the products category, a further distinction is made according to the product's status: legally required to spend money on or at least fulfill a certain task. In other words, products are either 'possible cuts' or 'to be left alone because of legal requirement.' The first group consists of activities the local authority has taken up or supported in its role as an autonomous authority, while the second group clearly belongs to the tasks it has to fulfill in co-governance (see Chapter 4, compare In 't Veld 1992). However, as the head of the local bureaucracy argues, this second group of products is not beyond the reach of economization, because a possible cut might be made if the job can be done in a more efficient way. The local bureaucracy itself and the employees are subject to similar treatment. Although numbers are use to confront actors with the hard facts of life that a forensic researcher has brought to the fore, it is interesting to notice that numbers also change at various times. Not only does it seem difficult to find out exactly what the right numbers are, at the end of the interpretive process facts are suddenly changed in a more radical way: a new hole is found.

An Exercise in Management

With the Close-The-Gap Story, two stories of governing are contrasted. The managerial story of governing becomes dominant as the adopted decision-making method focuses on products and numbers. At the same time the political story is used to paint an inferior alternative. Politicians are presented as being only after their own interests, thereby endangering and slowing down the process. What becomes visible is how the stories about bigger changes are pushed out of the Core Tasks Debate, while the Budgetary Deficit Story becomes central to it. The financial problem is highlighted, while the identity problem is hidden. It is observed that one possible identity – the municipality as an enterprise – is enacted. While the interim Gerrits offers a way out, some of the other actors in the Vision group start worrying about the absence of a 'vision' that drives the Core Tasks Debate. They argue that zero-based budgeting is 'too technocratic.' These actors want to involve political visions. However, those who complain are in a minority. Gerrits, who came to Heart-less Town as a problem solver after the crisis on the board, seems to be accepted as the leader of the group. Moreover, the political leaders are told that political debate can always take place at a later point in time. Now it is time for some radical decision making. The political leaders agree to handle their problem with the use of the decision-making method.

In line with what happened after the kick-off conference, the second conference forms a different kind of setting than the first one. Although the audience is again limited, council members and civil servants, this time there are few opportunities for more abstract debates on identity and roles. From behind the stage Gerrits and whose who work with him guide the sense making. In interviews and informal conversations I was told that the second conference was set up to serve a certain purpose: to come to a radical decision. First of all, the politicians used the decision-making method in the form of 'the exercise' that was completed the two weeks before the conference. The activities are now reduced to products with their own budget, thus enabling them to be compared. In line with the political story the decision-making method could be seen as a political game that consists of many small moves in the form of the scores given to products. However, in this political game the actors do not know what other actors are doing until after they have made all their moves. Moreover, during the conference some ambiguities concerning the meaning of the exercise were explicitly observed. A member of the board said that the parties that had a different interpretation of the exercise thought they came to a history exam while in fact it was a chemistry exam. In bargaining language, it was unclear to various actors what game they were playing. The rules of the game were managed while the game was played. The best example is the meaning of the scores given to products. Although some political parties interpreted the use of numbers as a way to start a debate and to indicate possible cuts as well as investments, the interim head of the local bureaucracy put forward a strict interpretation in which the numbers become sharp lines of demarcation between products that can be cut and products that 'are kept for the time being.' More than symbolizing the value that actors give to products, the numbers indicated the amount of money a possible cut can contribute to solving the problem. Taken together, the exercise substitutes a political debate on visions with a set of two kinds of products: those that will be cut and those that will be kept. It delivers on 'the promise of conflict resolution through arithmetic' (Stone 2002[1988]: 174-175).

Secondly, during the conference itself the politicians from both the coalition and the opposition are explicitly given the role of storytellers in order to commit them to the Close-The-Gap Story. This way it will be harder for the council members to back out later when the decision has to be defended in public. It is, however, questionable whether the politicians are more than an audience in their own show. One of the council members notices that the 'we' that started the debate at the kick-off conference has changed to the 'we' that is formed by the members of the council. The spatial arrangement of the conference works to underline the centrality of the politicians; they are in the middle of a circle although the tables that are usually in front of them during meetings are taken away. This is also meant to limit their physical and mental support, as a civil servant involved told me afterwards. In addition, the temporal location of the event – just before a council meeting in which the results of the conference will be formalized - robs the politicians of the opportunity to debate the ideas with a larger group of citizens, civil society or even party members. The typical way of making major decisions along the lines of the institutional set-up – public debates, monthly meetings - is only used as a way to safeguard the results of the managerial Close-The-Gap Story. The second conference, without spectators who would protest, is even more a backstage event than the first one. But even this backstage has its own backstage where Gerrits scripts what is going on. As chairs of the meeting making use of the numeric outcome of the exercise, interim Gerrits and his accomplices are able to confront the politicians with three options. Even though the options, the outcome of complicated calculations, seem to offer the possibility of negotiation, at close inspection they hardly disguise the fact that there is no real choice available; two of the options do not even meet the financial targets. This is what could be called a Hobson's choice (Stone 2002[1988]: 246), there is no real alternative if you want to comply with the demands. The consensus during the first conference seems to take more and more the form of the commitment of the politicians. They agreed on the urgent character of the issue, so they should act accordingly. The politicians are made important as storytellers and offered a choice that is not a 'real' choice. They must comply if they want to do the job they signed up for at the beginning of the Core Tasks Debate.

The enactment of the Budgetary Deficit Story and the image of the municipality as an enterprise, as it proceeds in the period surrounding the second conference, is in line with the earlier mentioned managerial idea that the problem that is faced is an urgent one. Therefore, starting a political debate could ruin everything. The politicians have to be protected against their own political selves who tend to protect their favorite policies. This is why the dominant actors on the day of the second conference confront the politicians with a strict interpretation of the exercise and three scenarios supported by quick and complicated calculations. Afterwards, one of the actors involved told me that the politicians were hardly able to understand the scenarios. This is also why the dominant actors planned the conference only six days before a public and formal staging of the council meeting. The political parties were given no opportunity to back out.

Even though some politicians call the Close-The-Gap Story 'technocratic' and 'Russian roulette' and the council seems to have little grip on the situation; the politicians go along with it. How was this possible? The lack of protest from the politicians can be understood if we take into account that the actors in the municipality have prior experience with core tasks debate. The practice story that is linked to this prior experience is when the politicians tried to organize such a debate it resulted in nothing much because they did not make decisions, as various actors told me in interviews. This was possible, according to the story, because there was no financial problem that forced politicians to make decisions. Having a core tasks debate meant not much more than cheese slicing. That the meaning of this core tasks debate should be different is something everybody seems to agree on. Moreover, making the cuts show the politicians as strong, decisive actors who do not run away from their responsibilities. An interview respondent who *did* criticize the present core tasks debate said that he did so only in a moderate sense, because his party was afraid of getting the blame if the process did not deliver the necessary cuts again.

Another reason why there was little protest might be that the *Changing Region Story* and the *Changing Society Story* had not been developed into a coherent and powerful alternative with actors supporting them. The Development Vision 2015 remained a process on its own and ideas about the changes in local society were not elaborated on. Alderman Hoekstra, who promoted the stories during the first conference and might have been the one who stimulated the development of the alternative or an integrating story, was in the end also the alderman with financial matters in his portfolio. Although in the remaining part of the process he is the main promoter of a story that unites the practice stories, as the alderman responsible for the finances he cannot permit a failure of the economic measures. In addition, whereas interim Gerrits is accepted as a leader and his ideas are executed, various civil servants think that what the alderman says is too abstract to be turned into concrete acts.

Yet another reason for the lack of protest can also be found in the promise by Gerrits that huge cuts in the local bureaucracy will be made. This gives the politicians the idea that it is not just 'them' – their products – that are cut. A final part of an explanation might be the promise that a 'real' debate will come later on. Nevertheless, the result is the acceptance of the specific way of treating the troublesome situation. It makes it possible for the dominant actors to avoid long debates about the identity or tasks of the local authority that might endanger the necessary cuts. The second conference produces a huge budgetary cut that has to be validated in the next round of discussion groups.

A Fusing Effort

After the second conference politicians and civil servants joined discussion groups that evaluated the cuts made. The institutional set-up of the local authority – in spatial, societal and administrative matters - was reflected in new groups. The groups tried to combine the financial need to make economic changes with the moral need to protect products that are very relevant for society. They also adopted an organizational logic that makes products hard to cut for other reasons. Nevertheless, the Process Guidance group makes sure that the process keeps apace. In this way a managerial grip on the process is retained. Moreover, the products and actors dealing with them are again separated. This helps to prevent political debate in larger groups. The civil servants and some stakeholders from civil society now get a small role in the governing. They get the opportunity to tell the politicians in the discussion groups why 'their' products are relevant. After the discussion groups have dealt with all products, the board started to work on its own. More than defending their case, they can provide information to the groups. Until that moment the storytelling had been left primarily up to interim Gerrits, who finished working in the municipality some time after the second conference. Following his departure the board tried to integrate the Close-The-Gap Story with other possible stories. These stories are ones that can be connected to the idea of a core tasks debate. On the one hand, they use their own political program as a way of looking at the problems. From this they take the main policy points. These are what could be called the 'core tasks' they identified for the political period for which they would be in charge. These core tasks are used as a focus for the policy making. On the other hand, they use parts of the *Changing Region Story* and the *Changing Society Story* in an effort to glue together different ways of looking at the problem the municipality is facing. A newly developed vision on welfare policy is invoked as well.

The representation of the fusing effort takes the form of a written document. The report Choosing and Connecting is the ultimate attempt to make one overarching story from the different stories. It is a policy document filled with, displays of visions and ambitions as well as with 'factual' developments, criteria and overviews of decision-making statements on individual products. As it says in the preface, the board claims the process to have been 'an intensive process of seeking direction and making choices.' With the report the board tries to *re*-present - in the sense of present again - the core tasks debate. The attempt to do this can be found in different parts of the text of report itself, but is perhaps most visible in its title and the interpretation that is given to this title throughout the report. The title - *Choosing and Connecting* - is supposed to give the core tasks debate a public name and thus replace the name 'Core Tasks Debate'. The title makes a play on words, changing the Dutch expression 'choosing *or* connecting,'[18] which means 'you cannot have it both ways,' to 'choosing *and* connecting,' which can then refer to 'having it both ways.' In the report the board explained why it used this name. 'Choosing' refers to giving priority to certain policies. The need to choose, according to the board, is 'a widely shared perception' and, if the council accepts the report, will lead to 'a healthy financial position' and 'a sustainable financial policy.'

Various statements in the report point out all the things 'connecting' is intended to mean. In the first chapter the board says that connecting refers to 'stimulating connections, searching for partners, making connections and improving cohesion.' The idea can be applied to connections between 'citizens of Heart-less Town and the local authority, citizens and organizations, Heart-less Town and municipalities in the region. And it also refers to, or so the board hopes, good connections between the board, the council, the board and [the] employees [of the local bureaucracy].' In another part of the report 'connecting' takes the meaning of 'the connecting of municipal tasks, activities and priorities.' The board also says that ('involved') citizens, politicians, civil servants and experts had discussions and that citizens have filled in a survey and provided suggestions. Presenting the report in its first chapter as 'the result of the core tasks debate' that is also a proposal to the council, the board demands special attention to the meaning of the report as a collective enterprise to which the members of the council and many others have contributed. The board seems to want to show that it is not a story it tells alone, nor one it has realized alone. That the core tasks debate already started connecting is most of all *implied* in the account of how the report was made. The new way of working does not start after the report is accepted; it has been part of the story of the core tasks debate all along. As one of the actors involved in the writing of the report said, the effort of the board's proposal was to create a common thread that was not actually there.

With the new account that the board gives in the report about what is going, it reframes the core tasks debate. The board claims to have overcome the financial problem, found direction, and the two should be seen as a collective effort. As a side effect, the general meaning of a 'core tasks debate' gets taken for granted and attention is redirected to the specific way –through choosing and connecting - in which Heart-less Town deals with its problems. The board clearly wants to show that it does not only rely upon economic measures, but acts from a coherent point of view, a political vision of what the municipality is all about. With its elaborate vision statements and reference to all sorts of connections, the report presents an attempt to redefine the identity of the municipality. But, referring to the variety of meanings available (see *Table 6.1* below), it ends up as a highly ambiguous narrative. While we saw that the process was mostly managerially driven, an image develops that a political vision was developed beforehand. In addition to claiming the use of a political story of governing, the board says it has made use of a consensus story of governing in the sense of connecting both ideas and people. Moreover, the version of the consensus story that is invoked is one in which the political community involves civil society and citizens.

The commitment of the council and a new event – more deficits – makes it possible for the board's proposal to be, for the most part, accepted with a more radical version of Close-The-Gap Story being adopted. This shows the dominance that the managerial story of governing still has. A typical illustration of this is the way in which the discussion group on roles of the local authority, initiated by alderman Hoekstra, never materializes. The actors in the Process Guidance discussion group seem to be satisfied with the way of working that has been found: first making decisions in the form of economical measures and *then* evaluating them using the legal, practical and moral criteria and visions that are available. Discussions about the roles of the local authority in the local society that would take place in this group are evaluated as an exercise without added value, even after one of the actors in the council tried to turn the tides with an account about the need to counter Neo-Liberalist thinking.

Hidden Meanings: Stories of the Stakeholders

Although the board did its best to reframe what was going on, it is questionable whether the report reflected the sense making as experienced by all those who were said to have participated in the debate. The new world of political visions and negotiation is one that exists primarily on paper. An effort to govern in a way that makes citizens more central was used to arrive at the board's proposal, but took the pre-structured managerial style that resembles the zero-based budgeting: a survey. Moreover, as in the Center Case (*Chapter 5*), the results of the survey are used as a touchstone and not as a starting point.

The core tasks debate as such had been hidden from the public for various months. The two conferences and many meetings that took place were not accessible to the public, even though one of the political parties complained about this from the beginning. With the publication of the report and summaries of it in the local newspaper, actors from outside the town hall were able to find out more about the core tasks debate than was available in the six months before that.[19] The public meetings – the council meeting in June and the public hearing in August – became public settings in which the report was discussed in the council and various kinds of criticisms among the actors who belonged to the audience of the report could be voiced. The board came into conflict with politicians and stakeholders who denied their role as storytellers in the previous period and argued that the board had given its own account of what was going on and what should be done. As for the politicians there were council members who argued that the board has made too many changes on its own that do not correspond to the choices the council had previously made. After the involvement the council had in the process leading up to the report it seems too late, however, to deny responsibility for the report as such. Nevertheless, the opposition parties attacked the speed with which the board wants the report to become the guideline for collective acts regarding the new budget, because they think, or at least state, that the public has not been provided with a good opportunity to take notice of the report and respond.

When it comes to the stakeholders from civil society, the report is mostly criticized because it is not in line with the policies of the past. In an effort to change his role of audience into one of storyteller, one of the stakeholders even offered an alternative account of the core tasks debate. He compared what the local authority had done with what he thought was the proper way to make decisions. In his view one should formulate a vision and talk to society, and then make cuts. In terms of governing this would mean putting the stories of governing in a different order: first politics, then consensus and finally managerial cuts. In what could be called the Inverse Governing Story, the actor recounts the Core Tasks Debate: The local authority in Heart-less Town has turned the world upside down. First cuts were decided upon, then information was gathered and finally a vision was added. It could be concluded that the new account in the board's proposal is not really the integration of the *Budgetary Deficit Story* and other stories available, but mostly an effort to add the other stories to the first. In other words, the proposal, although by and large accepted by the council, is not convincing for everybody and is not able to hide that the interpretive process allowed only a limited variety of actors to conduct the sense making on their own.

Table 6.1: Overview of Practice Stories during Core Tasks Debate

Practice Story	Setting (time and space)	Events, 'meaning of issue'	Entities	Collective Act Connected
Budgetary Deficit	Local bureaucracy short term	Finance was working on budget, hole was found, 'hole in the budget'	Civil servants in financial department	Looking for money
Changing Society	Local society, long term	'Changing society'	Identity the local authority, citizens, civil society, the local authority, politicians	Reorientation debates in local society
Changing Region	Region, long term	Vision made, province wants new vision, mayor leaves, 'changing region'	Identity municipality, province, surrounding municipalities, Queen's Commissioner	Reorientation debates in Region
Close-The-Gap	Local authority, short term (sense of urgency)	Hole in budget found, local authority closes it, 'hole in the budget'	Method, exercise, products, (weak) politicians	Cuts in budget, lay-offs
Inverse Governing	Governing in the last year	Cuts are made, information is gathered, vision is made 'world on its head'	A special local authority	Core Tasks Debate in general

6.4 The Culture of the Case

Now, at the end of this chapter, it is time to look back at the ways the actors made sense of the issue at hand and at the ways stories of governing were used to do this. The practice stories that were used in this case can be found in *Table 6.1*.

The Interpretive Process

The *initial meaning* of what was going on varies between *a hole in the budget*, *a changing society* and *a changing region*. One of the actors in the national debate on core tasks of central government at the beginning of the 1990s became part of the debate in Heart-less Town during the first general meeting – the kick-off conference.

Triggering a discussion about the roles and tasks of the municipality he argues for approaching the core task debate from a state-society angle. From a state-society perspective, government, and political parties overall, should rethink the state (government) and the relations it has with society (Van Twist 1995). This seems also the way the alderman in charge, framing the problem with the help of practice stories about a changing local society and a changing region, liked to look at the debate. The two change stories have one important thing in common: the event that started the sense making – a hole in the budget is found – is not the most important problem that should be tackled. But what the first meeting does is create a consensus about the idea that there is indeed a problem and that all should be committed to finding a solution.

Due to the dominance of interim Gerrits as a storyteller, the image about past performance, the position of the alderman (in charge of both finance and of the Core Tasks Debate), and promises about a debate in the future, the change stories can be set apart and remain underdeveloped in the interpretive process. In the struggle over the meaning of *what is going on,* the story is almost directly framed with a Budgetary Deficit Story about an amount of money that the local authority is missing. *What should we do* is taken to be 'finding money' in very short notice. The goal of the core tasks debate with the help of the calculated deficit of 1.8 million Euros becomes tangible.

The enactment of the hole in the budget is made easier with the decision-making method, through which the activities of the local bureaucracy - and subsidies to organizations in the local society - are translated into products that can be compared in terms of money. This downplayed the different meanings these activities have to actors in the local authorities and town at large. If products cannot be cut all together, then an efficiency cut is aimed for. The success of the method can be understood from the way in which both the board and the political parties are not just *given*, but also *accept,* a role as storytellers and, in this way, lose the ability to come up with, or defend, an alternative story. Nobody denies the reality of the hole in the budget, although one of the civil servants said about it: 'se non è vero, è bien trovato' ('if it is not true it is still well made up'). In this way the meaning of the problem is reduced to a financial issue that brings about an effort to *close-the-gap*. The story that is told is one about the local authority that will be back in control, if they make the right choice (Stone 2002[1988]: 138-145).

While at the beginning of the process the first meeting seemed to make the consensus story of governing the model for the interpretive process, it seems primarily to have been used to commit the politicians to a more radical no-nonsense approach. Drawing on a negative version of the political story of governing, the image of the weak politician was used to sidetrack the political debate. The politicians, when the outcome of the method is presented during a second general meeting, accepted the scenario that the interim offered them as a way to deal with the problem. Contrasting the use of a method to a situation in which politicians only protect their own interests in endless debates and invoking the image of choice, the interim was able to make the process more like a joint venture than it actually was. The possible consequences of the process were big in the sense that they included many of the activities of the local authorities, and through subsidies many organizations in the local society, but this was clearly countered by keeping the settings of the sense making small and controlled. In the many backstage meetings between council members and civil servants an acceleration of the regular institutional rhythm of monthly public meetings following from the managerial decisiveness can be seen. The institutional separations of the political and the bureaucratic organization – spatial, social and administrative matters – are used to serve this managerial way of doing by keeping products and actors separated. This does not mean, however, that the leading sense makers considered an effort to keep some sort of consensus during the process superfluous. In terms of organizational culture, they all had to be focused on going in the same direction,[20] in order to become an efficient enterprise.

Later during the process, negotiation and political visions got a second chance when the board tried to integrate the story about necessary cuts with various visions. The board's proposal, a policy document with many writers but with the board as the only dominant storyteller, presented a new identity of local authority, and a new relationship between the local authority, the local society and the region. In an ultimate effort to reframe the Core Tasks Debate, the board wanted not only to show that choices are made, but also how everything connects to everything. This effort can be especially seen in the new name of the Core Tasks Debate – choosing and connecting. But the way the alternative practice stories and stories of governing have to be added on to what has actually been the driving force makes the proposal a highly ambiguous meaning construct. The proposal, and the way visions were made part of it, hardly disguised a clear hierarchy between the Budgetary Deficit Story and the other stories. The three initial practice stories in the report become a more complex whole, with the description of cuts that were made, to which a description of ambitions and visions are added. In addition, the protest by civil society showed how the public was most of all involved rhetorically and as a touchstone. The opinion of members of the civil society was hidden for a long time. The disappearance of the discussion group on Roles – of the local authority - and the ease with which the discovery of a new hole was interpreted with the use of budgetary measures show how dominant the Budgetary Deficit Story and the underlying managerial story of governing have remained. In a public meeting later on in the process, an actor from civil society confronted the politicians with a story that frames this critique. First cuts were decided upon, then information was gathered and finally a vision was added. Although the process never really ends (a new hole in the budget is found, decision making is scattered), the *final meaning* for most actors seems to be a hole in the budget that has been taken up in an operation for budget cutting.

Stories of Governing

In conclusion, the use of stories of governing can be addressed separately. Political and managerial problems are all present at the beginning of the process to mobilize consensus about the need to act. Soon afterwards, the managerial story of governing became very dominant. The municipality is most of all treated like an enterprise that needs to slim down in order to survive. In order to reach this goal fast, the sense-making setting is delimited both in time and space. The political story of governing – with a negative image of weak politicians and long debates – is used to give the no-nonsense managerial view of the issue a positive meaning. Politicians are presented as weak actors because of their soft spot for safeguarding party political interests and their habit of debating forever. With the help of a method, the problem which has been turned into a mere financial one can be solved pragmatically instead of antagonistically. What the municipality does is expressed in terms of products with a budget that can be cut. Therefore, in order to solve the problem, politicians show their decisiveness. In line with a managerial story of governing the slogan seems 'Action Now, Nuance Later.'

Once the interim Chief Executive Officer, who promoted the managerial story of governing, is gone, the board tried to use the political and the consensus story of governing in a proposal to the council. Choices and connections should be made and are made. Or, that is at least what the board claimed. Both the political story of governing, that requires the actors to come up with political visions, and the consensus story of governing, that requires actors to work together in order to come to consensus, are invoked. Apparently, in the board's view, using the political and the consensus story, in addition to the managerial story is desirable, if not necessary, to be credible to the various audiences. In the end, despite their rhetoric in the proposal, the local authority has not been able to involve the public. What is interesting is that on the one hand the depoliticizing technique – the decision-making method - seems to turn sense making into something that can be done almost automatically, while on the other hand the central storyteller – interim Gerrits - seems to play it by ear. This can be seen in the way the rules of the decision-making method seem to emerge during the process together with the changes in the amount of money that is lacking in the budget. Politicians had to be persuaded on the spot. Seen in combination with the need to commit the politicians, this shows that the smooth looking managerial story of governing in which methods 'do the work' in practice turns out to be a lot more interactive and chaotic (cf. Noordegraaf 2002).

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[1] 'If it is not true it is still well made up'.

[2] Dutch: 'kerntakendiscussie'.

[3] Dutch: 'financiele huishouding'.

[4] This professor happens to be the one supervising my PhD project.

[5] This idea is to be derived from the image of the municipality as a local community.

[6] The confusion got even greater when one of the members of the two coalition parties told the audience that he thought it would be possible to invest more money in some products.

[7] A civil servant who had been working in the local government for over 5 years told me the politicians always want to look at the organization because they are not capable of making policy decisions.

[8] Text from survey. In Dutch: '…is van belang om inzicht te krijgen waarop de komende jaren bezuinigd moet worden. Het gemeentebestuur heft wel ideeen op welke terreinen dat zou kunnen, maar wij willen de uitkomsten van de enquete zwaar laten meewegen in de besluitvorming'.

[9] Minutes of meeting of *Process Guidance*, 30-04-2004.

[10] In Dutch: 'Kiezen en Kabelen'. An alternative title ('Choosing, not Piling Up') was used in an early version of the report.

[11] Eight people in total, apart from the four civil servants seated behind the board, attended.

[12] Various council members through their choice of clothing - orange t-shirts, hat, scarf and tie - show that they are aware of this, even though protests by some of them did not lead to rescheduling. The new mayor opens his first council meeting by blowing on an orange whistle, saying that he does not have a hammer yet.

[13] In addition, she argues that although the council would only 'take notice of' and not 'agree with' the proposal of the board, various political parties want to put forward serious

amendments to the board's plans. Two weeks before the meeting a civil servant told me that although the board wanted the council to agree on the proposal, politics was already making a move towards 'taking notice of'. This means so much as 'we have seen that you have produced a proposal but we will only seriously look at it and decide on it later on'. The civil servant also predicted that the council would complain about the adjustments the board made after the working groups gave their advice.

[14] As interviews showed the Core Tasks Debate actually offered the opportunity to make a policy document that elaborated on ideas already developed before the debate started.

[15] In my view there were quite some civil servants on the benches for the public and the interested citizens seemed to be at the most a handful of actors closely involved in associations, foundations and the like that were cut.

[16] The text is the one that the speaker gave to me. It differs at some points from the minutes of the public hearing, but I decided to follow the original text as written down.

[17] Who could be called 'the mayor of a province'.

[18] In Dutch: 'kiezen of delen'.

[19] Although one political party had complained about the backstage character of the Core Tasks Debate at the beginning, this was ignored.

[20] In Dutch: 'neuzen een kant op'.

7 Crisis!

'And then, all of a sudden… it is a crisis'

An informant

7.1 Introducing Free City and the Case

This case study examines a political-administrative crisis in Free City.[1] After introducing the municipality and the way I came into contact with it, the second section of this case study chronologically retells what happened. The third section analyzes the process using the idea of storytelling as the way actors make sense. The final section reviews sense making and the use of stories of governing in the case.

Introducing Free City

Free City is a town with approximately 25,000 inhabitants in the middle of the Netherlands. In contrast to Heart-less Town, individual actors and the local authority often refer proudly to it as a city. This is mainly because of the town's history, which is symbolized most of all by its old town hall.[2] This town hall is located on the municipality's main square. Although the main square these days accommodates national shopping chains like HEMA and Blokker, the building serves as a symbol of the city's rich history. It was built in the sixteenth century and still carries the name of the town hall function it fulfilled in the past.[3] But Free City is also seen as having the urban character of a city, in the modern sense of the word. The population of the town reflects its urban character, for instance through the relatively strong political left and through the presence of a Moroccan football club. Interview respondents also point to the problems the city deals with, which are the same ones as 'real' cities, but on a smaller scale. Just like Heart-less Town, Free City has grown substantively westwards and keeps on doing this.

The council in Free City has 21 seats. Up until March 2005 the council met once a month and had three committees in which societal matters, public space, and administrative and managerial matters were discussed. In March 2005 a new structure for meetings was introduced. After this the council met two times a month, instead of one time. These meetings were divided into a section during which council members could be informed and enter into preliminary consultation, a part during which they should have a political debate, and a part during which decisions were supposed to be made. The local bureaucracy of Free City has four departments and approximately 225 employees. In addition to a department for fire fighting, there is a department for Societal Matters, a department for Spatial Matters and a department for Concern and Control Matters. It also has a management team,with six members, who meet every week.

Box 7.1: The local authority after the 2002 elections

Council *(21 seats)*:	Labor *(4 seats)*, Christian Democrats *(4)*, Socialists *(4)*, Liberals *(6)*, Green Left *(2)*, Democrats *(1)*
Board 1 (*3 aldermen*):	Labor, Christian Democrats, Socialists
Board 2 (*4 aldermen*):	Labor, Liberals, Democrats, Green Left
Mayor 1:	Appointment renewed beginning of 2004, but left after crisis
Mayor 2:	Interim

Since the 2002 elections the council sat six political parties (see *Box 7.1*). Labor, the Christian Democrats and the Socialists all have four seats. The biggest party is the Liberals, with six seats. Green Left is new to the council with two seats and the Democrats have one seat. Three parties form the board in Free City: Labor, the Christian Democrats and the Socialists. The Christian Democrats and Labor put forward the same aldermen as in the period 1998-2002. The Liberal party, who for the first time in over 20 years is not part of the coalition, lost its place on the board to the Socialists, even though they (the Liberals) were the biggest party on the council. According to some, the leader of the Socialists and the leader of the Christian Democrats had already decided to form a coalition before the elections and did not want the Liberals to play a role of importance. The alderman from the Socialists is the first of his party to be on the council in local political history. The mayor started a second six-year term at the beginning of 2004. One of the plans of the board is to restart a major Urban Restructuring Program (see *Chapter 8*). Just like Heart-less Town, halfway through 2003 the board saw itself forced to implement substantial cuts as a result of financial scarcity, although it did not try to meet the goal – a cut of 1.5 million Euros - through a core tasks debate.

At the end of 2003 the alderman from the Christian Democrats became seriously ill, only to return months later, though still not functioning at 100%. The alderman from the Labor Party became ill at the beginning of 2004. He later on runs into a conflict with the other board members, resulting in the council announcing in October 2004 a loss of trust in both him and his colleagues on the board. One of the reasons the Labor alderman and the board were fired was because of overspending on the budget for an Urban Restructuring project. A new board is formed in which only Labor remains, although they replaced their alderman with an alderman from outside of town. The new board states that its aim is to 'do what is feasible,' because it has 'stepped on a riding train.'[4] This represents, among other things, the way urban restructuring is pursued.

First Contact

On a very hot day in the summer of 2004 my colleagues and I visited Free City to talk about the possibility of my conducting research there. We met mayor Slotenmaker and the Chief Executive Officer of the local bureaucracy in the mayor's office. Mayor Slotenmaker and Chief Executive Officer Arends told us about the rough time they have had during the past months. Since the board of mayor and aldermen have not functioned at full strength for quite a while, working hours have been long. Two of the four board members were not working at 100% due to illnesses. One of them had not worked since February. The other was still recovering slowly. Their impression of the state of affairs was followed by a short discussion of the reason for the meeting: my probable research in the municipality. Both the mayor and the Chief Executive Officer seemed willing to support me in my mission.[5] When, not long after this initial meeting, I interviewed CEO Arends, he sketched a picture of what was going on in the municipality. He predicted some interesting periods in the time ahead. Some weeks later, when I came to observe a meeting where the board's yearly financial plans were to be discussed, I was told that the board was 'on its way out.' This was endorsed through a motion of no-confidence against the board of mayor and aldermen in an evening meeting the week before. The day after the board was sent home the mayor called in sick, making it unclear whether he was going to return. Not long after that, the political parties started to negotiate the formation of a new board.

Looking back it is possible to identify the start of the interpretive process on October 13 (see *Box 7.2* for a chronicle of the Crisis), when three members of the board publicly announced they had lost faith in a fourth member. Various public acts of sense making took place after that, beginning with Labor leaving the coalition, followed by newspaper articles and formal declarations from board members. The process could be said to have ended when a proposal by two political parties in the council was agreed upon on the night of October 27. The collective action took the form of a majority motion of no-confidence against the whole board. Looking back at this period of crisis one of the civil servants in a high position referred to it as a 'roller coaster.'

Box 7.2: Chronicle of the Crisis

2002	March	New board starts
2004	October 13	Board members announce loss of faith in Labor Alderman Brinkhuis
	October 13	Labor leaves the coalition
	October 27	Council supports a motion of no-confidence against board

7.2 Fourteen Days on a Roller Coaster

October 13-27: The Act and First Reactions

On October 13, 2004, three members of the board of mayor and aldermen of Free City publicly announce they had lost faith in their colleague, alderman Brinkhuis. During the days after the event, many different accounts circulated.[6] Throughout October, more and more about the background of this event became public. The presidium of the council decided that the affair would be discussed on October 27.

On October 14 both the regional and the local newspaper took notice of what had happened the evening before. Before the municipal council meeting, the board of mayor and aldermen sent out a brief written statement to the municipal council members declaring that it had lost faith in one of its members. Apart from stating that they thought their colleague possessed 'too little administrative power and control,'[7] the board

members remained silent about the motives behind the step they had taken. Labor, to which the alderman belonged, reacted by withdrawing from the coalition.
The next day the board members stated in a press conference that the background of the decision included problems with the so-called 'Urban Restructuring Program.'[8] This Urban Restructuring Program consisted of various projects that the municipality started a couple of years before and that aimed at renovating various parts of the city. Too much money was spent on one of the projects. Brinkhuis was the alderman responsible for the projects. His colleagues reproached him for withholding information and for having lost control over the projects. Although the city restructuring projects together were still 'within budget,' one of the board members said that they were no longer able to work together with Brinkhuis. On October 16, the word 'administrative crisis' was used for the first time in the regional newspaper. This was followed a couple of days later by the appearance of the word crisis in the heading of an article in the local newspaper.[9] A well-informed actor told me that it was known that the implementation of the various projects in the Urban Restructuring Program did not develop very well, but that 'on the inside, they were beating each other's brains in over the case came as a surprise. They had kept that very well hidden from the outside world. And then, all of a sudden… it is a crisis.'

In a five-page letter to the council and in three articles that appeared in the week following the board's decision, Brinkhuis gave his account.[10] He argued that the truth in this case would never be established. What is of importance is that all 'players' look at their own role in a critical manner. What matters are the city and its inhabitants. What was happening now, according to him, was that the rest of the board wants to wipe its slate clean. He claimed that although he had made mistakes, he himself was still able to explain the 'Urban Restructuring-story,' but the others have robbed him of the possibility to do so.

Brinkhuis called himself someone who had to 'sacrifice,' although in his opinion the board members together were responsible for the Urban Restructuring Program.[11] The others should have known that he was more concerned about con*tent* than con*trol*. He wanted to take his responsibility and account for what he did after resuming his work in November. In addition, the alderman described 'an administrative climate' that developed in which he did not feel at home any more. 'Distrust' and 'games' played a big role. In his letter he also drew attention to the fact that he had been ill and argued that the disorganized board meetings regarding the projects in the Urban Restructuring Program had not helped his healing process. Brinkhuis aimed his arrows mostly at mayor Slotenmaker, accusing him of taking 'panicky measures'[12] and identifying him as the main cause of the bad atmosphere on the board. At the end of the letter he said that '[t]here are many more questions, probably many more than answers, images and stories. But which truth will be declared the truth for now is up to you [the council, MvH].'

An opinion piece in the regional newspaper supported alderman Brinkhuis by stating that discharging him was 'a little *too* easy,' Moreover, it argued that the Urban Restructuring case was not so problematic that the members of the board had to let the situation get out of hand like this. In the journalist's opinion this was a matter of 'bad leadership.' As a follow-up, one day before the meeting, the regional newspaper published a critical piece on mayor Slotenmaker, portraying him as an actor who was 'not at all undisputed.' The newspapers also paid attention to the opinion of the political party Brinkhuis belonged to, Labor. In a reaction to the board's statement this party had withdrawn itself from the coalition on the night the board issued its statement. The party leader[13] was quoted in one of the newspapers saying that '[t]hen, rather, it should all end.' Already for quite some time this party had missed the élan on the board and the coalition to really get things done for Free City. The Urban Restructuring Program was an example, fighting the need for housing and improving safety in the city were others. The party also wanted a new audit that could look into the management of the Urban Restructuring Program in order to find out what went wrong. Although other parties expressed different opinions, it seemed clear that they wanted the board members to give an explanation for their actions, not in the least place because they thought it was the council that should have made a decision about whether an alderman should resign or not.

In a reaction to the newspaper reports and Brinkhuis's testimony, the board sent a memo to the municipal council on October 26. The board's memo, a four-and-a-half-page document, tried to clarify a couple of things. First of all, concerning the question of whether the board could declare a loss of faith in one of its members, the board members argued that there were two separate relationships: one between the council and the board, and one among the members of the board. The second relationship was such that, formally, board members should account for there actions to each other. A second and the third part of the memo described what decisions were taken on relevant projects and what had 'factually' happened in the weeks before the board made its decision. The members of board argued that they had done their best to make better arrangements at the time when things became problematic, and that in the last weeks the alderman had let his colleagues down on several occasions. What stood out in the testimony (memo) was that the members of the board drew attention to additional problematic expenditures on a project the alderman was responsible for that did not belong to the Urban Restructuring Program.

October 27: A Long Council Meeting

On October 27 the council met in the Old Town Hall to discuss a report on the 'process side' of the Urban Restructuring Program and the letter to the council members in which three members of the board announced their loss of faith. The meeting took place in the council meeting hall on the second floor of the town hall. Usually before every meeting different groups of actors form to discuss matters until the meeting officially starts (eight o'clock p.m.) or the mayor, who chairs the meetings, asks them to take their seats. At this point the mayor typically proposes the agenda for the meeting after which visitors, who have asked for permission to address the council, normally get the opportunity to do so. Most of the time the 20 seats for visitors are not fully occupied, and the atmosphere that typically surrounds the council meetings could be described as relaxed.

This night things were a little different. First of all, this meeting deviated from a regular council meeting because of the interest various audience members showed in it.[14] This night some 100 visitors wanted to witness the debate in the council room. Among these visitors were citizens with some kind of political interest, but also many civil servants who felt involved in the situation. The fire brigade denied many visitors entrance to the council's meeting room. They had to listen to the meeting in the Wedding Room on the first floor, which is connected to the room on the second floor through an audio system. Aside from the audience, almost all regular actors were present: the board members, 20 out of 21 politicians, the secretary of the council, the civil servants who had a role as supporting staff, and finally two journalists.

Usually, the mayor chairs the council meeting as president of the council. Since the mayor had taken over the Urban Restructuring portfolio from his ill colleague and in this way became involved in the case, the decision was made that this latter role be given priority over the role as chairman of the council. Therefore, one of the members of the biggest opposition parties chaired the meeting.[15] A third difference was the agenda of the meeting. Instead of setting the agenda and offering the public an opportunity to have a say, the first part of the meeting consisted of the members of the board offering their view on the situation. The board members who sent away their colleague were specifically asked to account for this action. They all engaged in detailed descriptions of their own actions and relations.[16] A final difference could be found in the atmosphere that surrounded the meeting. Most actors described the atmosphere as tense and emotional. The pressure had been building up in the weeks prior to the meeting. Various actors told me that the outcome was unknown and that the only thing everybody did know was that it was an important night for the future of the administration.

Board Members Speak

At the beginning of the meeting the members of the board got their first opportunity to give their account. Alderman Van Zevenaar of the Christian Democrats, who became ill the year before and had started to slowly work again, gave her account first. Van Zevenaar said that she had had a difficult time when she realized that working together with her 'buddy' (alderman Brinkhuis) was no longer possible, but that there was no other option. The 'Urban Restructuring story' itself was not really the reason for the break-up however, although the 'facts' that were found indicated that it was bad enough to be. Although she and her colleagues had been willing to deal with the problem together with alderman Brinkhuis, embracing the motto 'all for one and one for all,' the alderman, in word and deed, had shown that he himself did not want to. At the end of her speech, when she said that Brinkhuis had sent them mail saying that they had to go on alone because he had already said good-bye, she started crying.

The second actor who gave his account was De Groot, alderman for the Socialists. De Groot is said to be a very good alderman, capable of supervising many of the tasks of his ill colleagues. A newspaper article that was published before the summer even suggested that he had become too much in control, demanding credits and occupying the political space that Labor had lost since its alderman had become ill. The alderman described himself as a hardworking and critical person. The last year, often working 60 hours a week, had been especially hard. He stated that good control is very important and talked about the way in which he and his colleagues had tightened control on projects in the Urban Restructuring Program during the year. At some point, he said, he realized that there was a problem on the board and with the way the administration worked. The discovery of yet another project outside of the Urban Restructuring Program under the guidance of Brinkhuis that was badly organized made something 'snap inside him'. He admitted that he lost his faith in his colleague. This colleague had not been able to come up with good answers and had only pointed at the 'collective responsibility' of the board.

Alderman De Groot then posed the question of whether the board members had done the right thing with their announcement. Although the council passed the final judgment, he thought the board did well to let the council know they had lost their faith because, although it made the situation more difficult for the board, it was an 'honest' way to act. He ended with the statement that everybody in local politics should ask himself what his contribution has been to the administrative process during the last six months. In a short discussion among three politicians and the alderman, he indicated that the board members, in the days before the meeting, had tried to give the council clear information, 'mainly the facts.' He said that explaining to the council the legal aspects of sending away the alderman had not been very wise, because actors had reacted by saying 'do we need such a lesson,' but during the last days it had sometimes been 'chaotic.'

The next actor who had the opportunity to give his account was mayor Slotenmaker. At the beginning the mayor said: 'it is difficult for me to tell a factual process story here without also expressing the emotions.' Then he took the audience back to a year ago when alderman Van Zevenaar became ill; he did this to describe the 'turbulent and difficult year' that followed and claimed that the working pressure was enormous. Subsequently, he described how he took over the work of Brinkhuis, who also became ill. He worked with the help of civil servants to make clear what had happened and to identify the financial situation of the projects in the Urban Restructuring Program. This was difficult. At one point the feeling arose that the case of the Urban Restructuring portfolio could potentially become 'politically sensitive.'

The mayor told the audience that he had used only one 'yardstick,' the one that indicated the general interest of the municipality. In his opinion an administrator should be responsible for the control of issues and should manage public money in a responsible way. Nevertheless, there should also be space for creativity. When it came to public money, the first responsibility of an administrator is with 'the city and its inhabitants.' The mayor also addressed the issue of accounting over the situation that had developed. He had chosen to address the council directly. He said that the process of the last weeks 'was about people, colleagues.' The task of the mayor is to bring unity, although that is not always possible, because sometimes, political processes take their own turn, and that is 'not his cup of tea'. In the very end of his account the mayor told the audience that the process as about people who do their best for the local society, and this was something that everybody should keep in mind for what follows.[17]

After this various politicians asked the mayor questions. The first question, raised by the party leader of Green Left, was why the board waited so long to inform the council about the problems with the projects if they had already become visible at an early stage. The mayor argued that, in the beginning, getting the facts right took a lot longer than he expected. It had not been possible to just 'push the button' to get all the facts. Subsequently, the mayor was questioned about his relationship with Brinkhuis and about what he did to maintain a good relationship, since the alderman had personally attacked the mayor in his letter. In interviews actors told me that people were shocked to hear the mayor say that he had not visited Brinkhuis on his sickbed.[18] The mayor said that their personal relationship was not of importance at that moment. The only thing he was after was trying to find out what was going on: 'there has to be clarity about the Urban Restructuring Program, and that has nothing to do with persons.' Moreover, what the mayor was after was 'factual information that was locked up in the organization.'

Brinkhuis was the last board member who had the chance to give his view and elaborate upon the letter he had sent to the council. For many actors it was the first time in months that they had seen him. Various actors told me in interviews that the alderman still looked very swollen, physically changed as a result of the medicine. According to one of them this was 'an emotional image against which rationale stands no chance'. Brinkhuis saids that he wanted to set one thing straight. According to him, at the time the other board members claimed he was not willing to cooperate with them, it was already clear that the board members did not want to go on with *him*.[19] He ended his account saying that it was up to the council to pass a judgment on the total board. After the council members asked various questions, the alderman left the meeting.

The Council Speaks

After a break, the chairman reopened the meeting. The leader of Labor, Panhuis, started his speech by saying that the inhabitants of Free City had been able to see what was going on inside the municipal 'kitchen.' He stated that it would have been better if the members of the board could have taken the alderman's illness, which had been visible this night, into account instead doing 'as if.' He said that claiming to regret the personal consequences for the alderman, as the board members did, was a matter of 'crocodile tears.'

Panhuis continued his speech saying that although Labor wanted the board to account for their actions after Brinkhuis had started to work again, the board did not want to wait for Brinkhuis' return. In Labor's opinion there were two matters to discuss. In the first place, the state of affairs surrounding the Urban Restructuring Program and, secondly, the way the board had announced a loss of faith. The second matter, in the opinion of Labor, was 'the last straw.' The 'political reality' was that in the council there was no longer a coalition with a majority.[20] Normally speaking, the next question should have been how the board accounts for the situation that had developed, but 'sadly enough, the reality was that three members of the board had suspended their collaboration with a fourth one, an ill colleague.' Labor introduced two motions. The first one was a motion of no-confidence against the whole board, not only their own alderman but also the mayor, who, according to Labor, should have been 'above party.' The second motion contained a proposal to install a commission that would investigate the case so the council could learn from it.

After the leader of the Democrats finished a short summary, the leader of the Christian Democrats, Bosman, took the opportunity to express his view.[21] Bosman told the audience that sometimes people manipulate what happens, but sometimes what happens dominates people. Although both had been the case during the last weeks, this meeting should be seen as part of a process that has been going on for a long time. The situation, he explained, is as follows: the biggest possible part of the board has announced

its faith in a colleague and Labor has withdrawn from the coalition. This, he summarized, 'is no way to treat people, not as a party and not as a board'.
Bosman added five remarks. Labor should have taken its responsibility towards the coalition and the coalition program. Secondly, the board should never have publicly announced a loss of faith in an ill colleague. The third remark was that the Christian Democrats think 'the facts,' although partly known, are very serious. The fourth remark concerned the observation that, despite the signals his party sent, the board still had not been able to express a 'mea culpa' in order to show its regret. After pointing to Labor as contributing to the problem, he said that the board had not been able to admit its faults in the form of a 'mea culpa.' The board should resign, although that should be seen more as a gesture to the council than as something that had substantive significance, because the council itself makes the final decision on firing or not. Fifth, the Christian Democrats think the coalition program is still meaningful and they are sad to see that Labor does not want to wait for an independent investigation before they pass a verdict. The party wants this investigation to take place, focusing on the role that *all* actors involved have had, and not just the board members as Labor seemed to suggest.

The leader of the Liberals began with the announcement the board made (about having lost faith in their colleague) and described what happened next: a game of 'no it isn't - yes it is' that resulted in 'unjust behavior of this board towards the council, as well as towards the alderman involved. But most of all, it was a case of unacceptable behavior towards people. This is no way to treat people. Collegiality means protecting each other from mistakes'. People have been damaged and with this the 'standing of politics'. The party leader described the situation as a 'soap opera' ('there is gossip, there is distrust') in which her party did not want to have a role.

After some discussion Green Left gave its opinion. The party leader said that '[t]he situation in the board and in the coalition is, if we look at the position taken by Labor, basically untenable. Is it in the interest of this city to allow this political uncertainty to last any longer?' Since the coalition was no longer sustainable, the council should ask itself what to do. The party also asked about the attitude Labor had displayed and whether this had contributed to what the board had done to one of its members.

The last one to speak was the third coalition party, the Socialists. The leader of the Socialists started by saying that although the speakers all used 'big words,' he wanted to keep it factual. The leader of the Socialists stressed that the meeting was actually about the Urban Restructuring Program. According to the Socialists, he said, the state of affairs of the Urban Restructuring Program was not that bad. He also pointed to a letter of the housing corporation that supported this view. The leader of the Socialists argued that it was inevitable that the board members would make the decision they did, although it was not done in the most admirable way. An investigation was needed, but it would be 'madness' to, on the one hand, pass a motion of no-confidence, and on the other hand start an investigation. The Socialists still had faith in the board, especially in their own alderman. They wanted to go on with the same board, possibly enlarged with parties that supported the coalition program. When it came to Labor, the leader of the Socialists argued, that although this party had started to take the 'leading role,' the question should be what they had done to prevent the crisis. Labor had not kept its word and did not take responsibility for its own alderman.

In reply to the idea of starting with an investigation, Panhuis argued that Labor did not need 'to analyze the facts and find the guilty one' any more. Labor did not want to refrain, endlessly, from making a decision like other parties. For them it was clear as it was. There was more that went wrong than the Urban Restructuring Program and the party now wanted to 'make a fresh start.'

A Debate around Midnight

After the break the mayor had the opportunity to react to the proposed motions – one of no-confidence and one for an investigation - on behalf of the board. The mayor told the audience that the board primarily wanted to react to the proposal made by the Christian Democrats. They had proposed that the board members would remain while the whole Urban Restructuring trajectory was investigated, including the role of all players. The mayor had the feeling of being 'symbolically' between the board and the council. He continued by saying:

> We have to work this out together. It is a difficult subject. It is about people and people demand carefulness. The board wants to work together on this. In the meanwhile, the board, together with mister Brinkhuis, will work together on the governing of the city. We hope to be able to find a way, only in case he is able to do the same. I hope we can find each other in this, because, as we have all said, the city should go first.

One interview respondent told me that he found the board members' proposal to try to work together again with Brinkhuis an 'incomprehensible move' and another called it the 'blunder' of the evening.[22] They thought that the board would take 'the honorable way out' and resign before being sent away.

After another short pause the Liberals said that they thought that if the mayor said 'the human is important' […] 'that apparently has been forgotten in the preceding trajectory. [The Liberals think] it is a sad pathetic proposal, a mere pretext, in brief, the Liberals do not have faith in it.' Labor, Green Left and the Democrats did not agree with it either. The party leader of Green Left reasoned as follows:

> Politics is also politics of emotion and feeling and I have to admit that, in the past trajectory, the board, that is, those members still present, has seriously damaged that and… if I hear the story of the mayor at this moment, it is not very credible. There are no excuses…

The leader of the Socialists rephrased the question his leftwing colleague had just posed: 'What is in the interest of the city?' According to him the board's proposal was in the interest of the city. If we do not agree with the proposal, 'the whole city will be the victim'. He ended by saying that 'everybody has apparently counted heads, but according to me you have made a considerable miscalculation'.

When it became apparent that it was only the Socialists and the Christian Democrats who were willing to support the board's proposal, it was rejected. Then, the chairman announced that the motion of no-confidence against the board would be dealt with first. The text of the motion of no-confidence contained three elements. First, the board together had made considerable mistakes in the steering of the developing plan for the Urban Restructuring Program and the accompanying plan for its execution. Second, the way three members of the board had subsequently dealt with these mistakes by announcing a loss of faith was a careless and totally arbitrary action. Finally, to gain authority for the board in the society of Free City, the council and the working organization were left with no other option than 'to make a fresh start.'

At that moment the mayor asked whether the motion was also explicitly meant for him. The leader of the Christian Democrats Bosman added that the legislation argued that the council, before declaring it had a disturbed relationship with the mayor, should have first discussed the motive for this declaration. In a short break with the 'juridicial part of the company,'[23] the chairman gave the following interpretation of the regulation: for a disturbed relationship to be discussed with the Queen's Commissioner,[24] a loss of faith should be expressed to be able to establish a disturbed relationship. Hence, losing faith in the mayor, according to the juridical interpretation made, can be part of the motion.

Thirteen of the twenty council members present supported the motion of no-confidence against the board. Only the two parties that were left in the coalition did not. Then the second motion (proposing an investigation) was discussed. Some changes in the wording were made. The text now said the roles of 'all' the ones involved should be looked into. Only the Socialists did not want to vote for it, because they thought the result was predetermined, since the 'scapegoats' were already found. A member of the Christian Democrats gave the last long statement:

> This week somebody told me that… reproached me, because I behaved like an ayatollah when it comes to ethics. That was because I was in favor of sending all people involved home, on the basis of what was said before, you do not send home an ill alderman. But talking to everybody and referring to the opening statement of the party leader [Panhuis], that sometimes events take hold of people, and listening to the individual members of the board, although I renounce what they have done, I think that they also in a certain way, have become victim of the whole story, that they do not deserve that we, again despite what I think of sending away alderman Brinkhuis, that we have spoken before research was done, that they are also victims, victims that sometimes take the wrong decisions […]

Except for the Socialists all parties supported the motion for an investigation. After it was approved the chairman thanked the council and closed the meeting.

7.3 Making Sense of a Crisis

A crisis […] is a creation of the language used to depict it; the appearance of a crisis is a political act, not a recognition of a fact or of a rare situation.

Edelman (1988: 31)

Initial Meanings and an Opposing Story

The previous section gave an idea of what went on in the administrative crisis. Now it is possible to look explicitly at the way the issue at stake was put into meaningful contexts. In other words, this section looks at the center crisis again, but now as an interpretive process in which actors make sense through storytelling (see *Chapter 2*). The sense making that is performed begins with an event in the political-administrative organization itself. This focus on the local authority creates a case in which actors are telling stories about themselves, or at least about those actors with whom they interact frequently. The practice stories are exclusively stories about the practice of governing. The day after three board members undertake the act of publicly announcing to have lost faith in alderman Brinkhuis, they tell the first practice story about the event, presenting the initial meanings of what was going on.

The *Weak Alderman Story* argues that a member of the board has to be fired. The setting is the board during the last year. The main actor is Brinkhuis. His acts should be given attention. According to this story the alderman is malfunctioning: he acted weakly in the management of his portfolios and had broken fundamental institutional rules in a project of the Urban Restructuring Program, but also in another project under his responsibility.[25] The board's announcement of a loss of faith in Brinkhuis is presented as the only thing the board members could do to solve the problem. The Weak Alderman Story is enacted in the announcement and like this becomes an act that the council 'only' has to confirm to effectuate. Things could no longer go on like this, because a team can only function well if all members fulfill their tasks. The acts by the board attain the meaning of a managerial intervention, although the institutional rules are kept intact when the board makes the announcement known to the council in an official letter. So, what they are saying is that they had to intervene, but are still able to follow the institutional rules. They give a demonstration of what management can be: decisive behavior within the institutional boundaries. The managerial story of governing is up front in the way the board members present what is going on. More than setting a problem that others can help them to solve, the board members confront people with the solution. Doing this they claim to have access to an undeniable reality. Nevertheless, for most actors in the municipality, the announcement came as a surprise. For them, the process had just begun and other realities still have to be uncovered.

The Weak Alderman Story meets an opposing story rather quickly and it signals the beginning of a struggle over meaning that will last for two weeks. Brinkhuis himself puts forward an opposing story and obtains the support of the press. The *Bad-Board-Members Story*[26] argues that the board members ran into a problem and tried to blame it on one of their own. The setting is the board during the last months; the period is when things went bad in the Urban Restructuring Program. There are various acts that could be taken into account, but the act that really stands out is the announcement by the board itself. The main actors are the three members of the board, although there is special attention on the mayor. The victim is alderman Brinkhuis.[27]

According to the storytellers, the act by the board members looks like a political move in a political fight. Brinkhuis argues that he had to 'hang' and the newspaper called him the weakest actor on the board. During the interpretive process what happened is depicted more and more as a political feud. Whereas governing can be a game with tactics, it has now turned into a moral matter in which principles become important. As stated in *Chapter 2,* feuds do not just turn colleagues into adversaries, they turn them into enemies that try to harm each other (compare Edelman 1988: 66-68). What mostly makes the act of the board members unacceptable is the fact that the alderman was ill. A political move could be expected from a politician, although it is normally hidden backstage. But focusing attention on desirable social interactions, the act obtains the meaning of an unethical act.[28] Those telling the story accuse the board of hiding their political move. The often repeated refrain of those who use this story during the interpretive process becomes the phrase 'that's no way to treat people.' If a member of your team is ill, you should not try to get rid of him. Moreover, on the board the actors should work together, in a consensual way, looking for what unites them. The political opponent was kicked while being already on the ground. Judging the board seems not too hard if this story is seen as what is going on. Those who come to the rescue of the alderman are the noble members of the council, defending the weak like they always do. Nevertheless, the precise political consequences remain unclear for some time. In both the fight and the feud version, the story about what has happened clearly reflects the political story of governing.

Constructing a Crisis

There are various acts taking place during the interpretive process. On the one hand, there are pieces written in the media and letters sent to the council. On the other hand, there are many informal meetings and phone calls between all kinds of actors. Many of these acts may themselves also be constructing a setting in which the tension builds. While the first practice stories framed what was going on in opposing ways, the interpretive process creates its own reality. This reality is one that conflicts mostly with the way in which the board wished to frame the situation. Whereas the board members downplay their own act, others successfully draw attention to it and make it into a problem of its own. Two acts stand out, because they give meaning not only to the act by the board members, but to the process in which actors together will have to make sense of what the board did together.

First of all, withdrawing from the coalition the Labor party enacts a conflict that the board created with the outside world. Labor, on the one hand, puts distance between it and the board's actions. They do not want to be associated with them. It is not Labor that can in any way be found guilty of doing such a thing. And on the other hand, Labor terminates the coalition. With its majority in the council the coalition could have been an essential board partner. The coalition could have formalized the firing of the alderman during a council meeting. Just like the board members presented their act as the most rational thing to do, Labor presents its act of withdrawing from the coalition as the logical result of the behavior of the board members. The act 'hides itself' more or less behind the board's announcement. What Labor did does not become the center of the debate, nor does it keep Labor out of the coalition that is formed after the resignation of the board. To this extent, it could be considered successful sense making.

Secondly, triggered by both the announcement of the board and Labor's withdrawal, the journalist for the regional newspaper introduces the label 'administrative crisis.' Crisis, as a metaphor, draws attention to things that are out of the ordinary - things that went wrong or are going wrong - and hides the things that are still going on in a normal or desirable fashion. Calling the situation a crisis also turns out to be a successful act of sense making, since this label remains central throughout the interpretive process. What is remarkable about what is going on was already highlighted in the Bad-Board-Members Story. That story brought what is backstage to the front stage and expanded the setting. Interestingly, in this way, it also showed that it is common to hide conflicts from the public. As two party leaders argued, it offered the public a look into the 'kitchen' of the administration and made a serious world look like a soap opera.

While the moralistic version of the Bad-Board-Members Story was already able to broaden the setting of the interpretive process to include a bigger audience (cf. Edelman 1988), the crisis metaphor turns separate events into one problematic situation that needs a resolution. By becoming accepted language, the crisis metaphor helps to construct the Crisis Story. The work the crisis metaphor does can be found in what happens after it is introduced. Once the metaphor is accepted as a reality, it makes actors act in accordance with its meaning (Burke 1989: 137), as occurs with the meaning issues generally obtain. In interviews the period between the board's announcement and the moment the board is sent away is referred to as something that had its own political dynamic: 'once it starts to roll there is nothing you can do.' A state of crisis invoked similar metaphors like that of a roller-coaster ride. The meaning of the board's act is now the beginning of a crisis. That act is no longer a solution, but a problem in itself. It is depicted as a breach in the fundamental norm. What happens next can hardly come as a surprise. As the anthropologist Turner already told us a long time ago, sides are then taken, and if not sealed off the crisis expands to a point at which it coincides with a dominant rift across the concerned parties and social relations (Turner 1974: 38). What might seem a small detail is the exact naming of the crisis as an 'administrative crisis.' However, calling it an *administrative* crisis and not a *political* crisis associates the crisis with the board and not with the political setting in which the crisis takes place. It also sets some limits about the other actors who might be involved.

Although the Crisis Story, like the Bad-Board-Members Story, might not tell the actors precisely how to act in the form of a clear solution, it does important work for those who want to oppose the board. The Crisis Story helps to create a sense of urgency. It helps the opponents of the board argue that something has to be done instantly to return to a desirable state of affairs, to fabricate a radical way out. With the help of authoritative acts, the social norms should regain their force. Crisis asks for central control. With the board contaminated by the image of unethical acting, the council can claim its role as head of the municipality. A managerial story of governing becomes more prominent in the sense making. During the interpretive process political parties in the council start to see the crisis as a window of opportunity for those who are able to control the situation. The image of crisis helped to 'challenge the knowledge, status and authority claims of those individuals and groups seen to be responsible' ('t Hart 1993: 40). The meaning of the act by the board is no longer that of an intervention, but that of a political act that needs to be responded to with managerial intervention.

After the successful attempt to make social relations in the board the topic of newspaper articles, the practice of giving social accounts, reading them, and talking about them seems to be part of the appropriate way of doing during this crisis. The material that the actors and audiences can make use of varies across newspaper articles, including a character study of the mayor on the one hand, and emotional speeches during the night of the meeting on the other. The relationships between the main actors are the main subject of the dramas. Clearly, the journalists in Free City –mainly the one from the regional newspaper - become important actors in the construction of the spectacle (Edelman 1988) as they raise a moralistic voice to put the facts into perspective. Although looking back at the interpretive process actors said that what was going on with the Urban Restructuring Program was not that problematic, the reality of the crisis situation is not denied at all. Many interview respondents blamed the board members themselves for constructing the crisis, or at least making it easy to construct. What these actors were pointing at is that the act of the board was obviously an act that had to be made sense of collectively. The board members could have waited and let Brinkhuis explain the weak management in the Urban Restructuring Projects to the council. But let us get back to the way the case did develop.

In reaction to the crisis the board members tried to enact their own practice story. They do not use the newspapers but elaborate on their original practice story, sending a long letter to the council. In this letter, they point at the legal character of what they have done. This is partly in reaction to council members calling the act illegal and partly in reaction to what the alderman had said. They say that what has happened is part of what might happen within institutional boundaries. Invoking the managerial story of governing, they also support their original account with a detailed factual description. The facts are asked to speak for themselves. The board members want to bring the crisis back to a series of factual events, which can be judged with the help of the institutional rulebook. However, the board members are not able to turn back the clock or control the process. It becomes more and more clear that the council meeting on October 27 will be a decisive moment in the history of the board, and the opposition might play an important role.

One of the political parties still left in the coalition tries to bargain with other parties backstage. But for bargaining - in the form of peaceful negotiation - there is not much space. On the one hand there are two groups – Labor and the rest of the coalition - that are too much at war to negotiate. Bargaining between these two groups had been done on other occasions that year, but now integrating various ways of looking at the issue backstage seems impossible. On the other hand, the three opposition parties in the council have no reason to bargain at all. If according to a consensus story of governing the actors should look for what unites them, this has become problematic through the act of the board. That is, it is hardly credible for the opposition parties to call for consensus in this politicized setting. If bargaining is conducted according to a political story of governing, then the opposition parties would rather wait and see. Efforts are made, including promises of a new board in which opposition members might play an important role. The opposition parties are – or at least act as if they are - very troubled by what has been going on and want the board members to account for their act. There has been a serious threat to the normal, desirable, consensual kind of governing. Arguing again from a political story of governing, the question becomes: why should the opposition save the board if the coalition does not do it? The opposition can sit back until the coalition members have slaughtered one another. After this they can take over.

A Drama on Stage

The night of the meeting forms a special moment in the interpretive process. In this 'drama on stage' actors use the meanings made available over the last weeks to convince the large audience present. In fact, the story elements that were united by the council meeting itself make some events become more plausible than others. The set-up of the meeting deviates from normal meetings because of the large audience. In addition, the position of the mayor - who is not chairing the meeting and thus not in charge of who is allowed to give his or her vision of reality and for how long – as well as the agenda of the meeting and the tensed and emotional atmosphere, force a departure from the 'normal' council meeting.[29] The newspaper reports, foreshadowing a fall of the board and drawing attention to one of the main actors - mayor Slotenmaker - help to create a setting in which one of the most dramatic events possible in political life - a board that is sent away - becomes a realistic scenario. The meeting is a mix of a public hearing in which actors account for their deeds and a public drama in which social relations are shown on a stage in front of an audience.[30] Taken together, the meeting underlines the problematic character of what is going on and the need for a resolution.

During the night of the meeting three lines of reasoning are proposed. These three lines of reasoning use and integrate available meanings differently in order to establish an authoritative story that makes sense of the act that started the interpretive process. The board members, sending their efforts in a new direction, ask, in a complicated way, the audience to understand the necessity of their act. Their opponents from Labor condemn both the act and the policy making of the board in general. Constructing a new story in an effort to find common ground, the Christian Democrats condemn the act of the board but make it understandable given its role as part of a bigger picture.

Let us start with the effort of the board members. The board members seem to know that if they want to stay on, they have to perform as credible storytellers with credible accounts. One of the actors close to the board told me in an interview that the morning of the meeting the message had reached the board that a vote of no-confidence was in the making. The civil servants had advised the board members to show regret for their actions. Taking their role very seriously, on the night of the meeting the board members try to persuade and negotiate at the same time. On the one hand, enacting their truthfulness and decisiveness, they hold on to their act as the right thing to do. They stress that their account gives nothing but 'the facts' and continue their effort to come up with a story that is credible because it is true. The managerial story of governing, according to which governing can be a rational affair that is based on the clear facts of the matter, remains important in their account. Money is gone and rules have been broken. A managerial intervention was legitimate. Even if this type of governing might have painful social consequences, rationale should rule over emotions.[31] The strongest opponent of the way the board uses the managerial story is Brinkhuis, who wrote in his letter to the council that it is his word against that of the board members and that the truth will never be established. Which, of the various possible truths is *called* the truth, is up to the council. This distinguishes Brinkhuis's performances from that of the other members of the board. Brinkhuis does not claim a monopoly on the truth, while the board members do. The board members seem to believe that offering the possibility for multiple realities of the act they performed would make them look both less credible and even weak.

At the same time the board members redirect their stories towards social relations.[32] Their accounts react to the Bad-Board-Members Story. The weak alderman becomes the bad alderman. The problem for which the board members had found a solution is no longer a poorly functioning employee, but rather a team member who broke the trust. The connotation of the team to which the alderman did not want to belong anymore becomes a social one.[33] Teams are no longer managerial units that have to stay in control, but rather social settings in which human actors work together in harmony. In fact, what the board members are now describing becomes more and more similar to what the Bad-Board-Members Story describes, although the villains and heroes have traded places.

The consensus story is used as the ideal against which a team member revolted. For the board members, adding another story or shifting their account goes hand in hand with a focus on the period in which all of the board members had a hard time. In defending their acts they construct a *Board-Under-Pressure Story* about how various members of the team became ill and the remaining members had to work very hard. Mayor Slotenmaker fills in the picture of the setting saying that the pressure during the last year was enormous. Slotenmaker claims to have had the ultimate goal, the public interest, at heart during the whole period.[34] He is saying: do not judge me on the appearance of one act; judge me on the intent of my actions in general. In the Board-Under-Pressure Story the board members reinforce their decision, saying that it was the best thing to do for them at that moment. Compared to the Weak-Board-Member Story, the attention has shifted to the board members themselves and the setting they had to work in. De Groot, the alderman of the Socialists, also argues that the setting that the Board-Under-Pressure Story talks about does not only include more acts of the board, it also includes more actors (not only the board members): everybody in local politics should have asked himself that night what role he played in what happened. The meaning of the act of the board members becomes an act of despair. It is suggested that it is hard to stay in control with political enemies all around and with such high pressure. This story counters the effort of the Labor party to expand the setting to include the total policy making efforts that the board had undertaken since it started working in 2002. De Groot makes an important difference through the attacks on the board, because the enlarged setting he offers also includes other actors who could take part of the blame.

After the interpretive process obtains the label 'crisis' Labor already started to put a second line of reasoning forward. This included interpreting the act of the board members into a practice story that has an even larger setting. They tell what could be called a *No-Good-Administration Story*. During the period the board is in charge (since 2002), the administration of the city has not been good. Examples of their bad management include Urban Restructuring, safety and housing. The whole board is to blame. The council and the city are the victims. While the board has replaced its managerially inspired story with a political one, Labor has added a managerial story on top of the political one. This is a clear effort to relate what has happened to what should be done. The normative leap (Rein and Schön 1977) from 'is' to 'ought' is quite simple: the political period of the board should end. The meaning of the act of the board becomes that of a 'last straw.' With the drama fresh in the minds of the audience, Labor integrates two meanings of the board's act – unethical and last straw – in an institutional proposal: a motion of no-confidence. If the council accepts the motion it performs a managerial intervention itself. It will act within the boundaries of the institution. In that sense it will copy the actions of the board two weeks earlier. Labor also invokes the idea of future research, but not one that will look for the guilty ones, because those are already found. Being managerial can thus be restricted to making a firm decision. This research can take place after the meaning of the issue is established and formalized.

After others have proved unable or unwilling to integrate opposing views, the leader of the Christian Democrats, Bosman, steps forward to offer a novel view of the situation. Wanting to hold on to the coalition, he integrates the meaning of the act as something unethical with that of something done in despair. With this he presents a *Tragic Story*. Here, we can see tragic human characters having a hard time completing their mission mostly because of circumstances they do not and cannot control. The setting that is created is a setting in which actors try to organize the administration of the city, but are faced with all sorts of events that cannot be attributed to them. On the one hand, the events that took place were the actors in the board becoming seriously ill. On the other hand, after a leadership change in Labor, this party undertook acts that damaged the coalition. As Bosman argues, 'sometimes people manipulate what happens, but sometimes what happens dominates people' and in this story 'both are the case.' Important new 'actors' in this story are fate and (the leader of) Labor.

Bosman goes on with the enlargement of the setting in a way that De Groot had started. More actors should be taken into account. Bosman tries to push some of the blame away from human intent towards the realm of nature (Stone 1989), thereby giving fate a role in what has happened. Nobody can be blamed for people getting ill. There is also special attention for Panhuis, the leader of Labor. On the night of the meeting, but mostly in interviews, actors stressed that for quite some time Labor had not been supporting the board.[35] Labor had been criticizing the board ever since the board presented its annual financial plans at the end of 2003 and especially in a 'traffic-discussion' earlier in May 2004.[36] According to an article in the regional newspaper before the summer, these acts were partly meant to change a situation in which alderman De Groot was getting all the political attention and Labor none. Some interview respondents thought that Labor was planning to use the October presentation of 2004's annual financial plans of the board to send the board home.[37] De facto, these actors said, the board had lost the institutional majority during 2004 and was no longer able to count on the support needed to win individual battles. The event that started the crisis for Labor was just a good opportunity to end the coalition. Panhuis was out to get rid of the coalition and it would happen sooner or later. Here, it is possible to see how the political story, as a depiction of what has been going on, becomes more elaborate and starts to point at different actors in the same manner. These actors are all said to have been after their own interests.

The leader of the Christian Democrats, Bosman, attempts what could be called an *act of reframing* (compare Schön 1994[1979]), in the sense of bridging a divide between opposing views of reality.[38] He points at the mess that the political story has made. He also points to the lack of control available when political enemies, who should be partners, try to harm you and when fate plays tricks on you. In particular, putting forward a fatalist story of governing as a critique of the control themes prominent in managerial story is novel. Whereas the stories that are circulating are obviously in favor or against the board, Bosman offers a view that condemns the act of the board members, but at the same time creates understanding for it and gives part of the responsibility to other actors. The board members have perhaps acted as villains, but they have also become victims. The leader of the Socialist party even makes them 'scapegoats.' They are tragic figures with character flaws, but at the same time they are heroes trying to do good things. The final account of another member of the Christian Democrats underlines this view. Coupled with the tragedy, the way to go forward consists of a *mea culpa* and resignation of the board, with a renewed effort to go on governing, perhaps in another constellation. Bosman also proposes an investigation. This investigation, however, is meant to create a big setting in which *all* actors and their acts fit. It is not just limited to the members of the board and their acts. Arguing that the investigation should be an 'independent' one, he also reminds the audience of a possible difference in the fact-finding that is being conducted during the meeting.

Final Meanings: Character and Political Judgment

Both despite the efforts of the board members *and* because of them, the struggle over meaning does not lose its focus on the board. In an effort to present themselves as credible actors whose acts can be understood from the story in which they have become a part, the board members become personal - even though they have a different way of doing this. Two of the board members characterize themselves as hardworking actors, doing what is asked and even more. They could have perhaps done some things differently, but the acts of the alderman and the situation in the board forced them to act. At least they were able to use the managerial story of governing: instead of being paralyzed they obtained control. They argue, in other words, that it would not be fair to blame them for what happened. They are only human. De Groot, the alderman of the Socialists, also calls their deed 'honest' and he does this by comparing the act to waiting until the council fired him.

This way the board members and the things they did - especially sending away the alderman - remain at the center of attention. The relationships between the main actors, everything the board has done 'in private,' is not just shown but expanded upon on the stage.[39] Despite the efforts of the board members and what is left of the coalition, the focus on the board on the night of the meeting makes one (f)act matter most. This is the (f)act that undisputedly took place, the (f)act that is the reason all these other actors are to be there and witness the political spectacle. It is the (f)act of the wrong treatment of an ill man. The political feud story remains dominant as the reality of what happened. On the night of the meeting, Brinkhuis as the ill alderman - who looks swollen because of the medicine he was still on - becomes a symbol, performing the physical evidence of bad behaving board members. Although various actors, using various stories, claim to be the victim or point at other actors like the coalition or the city to play that role, Brinkhuis as the ill alderman clearly embodies this part.[40] The distinction between an ill and weak board member on the one hand, and healthy and strong board members on the other, is used successfully in this way. It helped to differentiate between villains and victims in a way that would have been more difficult if all board members had been categorized as ill - in the sense of temporarily incapable of defending themselves. That one of the board members was said not to function at 100 % and that the other two might not have been in their right mind because they were overworked had to be ignored. This would then make it possible to blame the healthy and strong for mistreating the ill and weak.

In the main, the final judgment becomes a judgment of character. The question is more and more whether what has happened is a result of a difficult situation in which good actors became trapped or were of a bad character that made them try to deal with a difficult situation in the wrong way. The leader of the Christian Democrats, Bosman, trying to do damage control, argues that it is a little of both. What should be done in such a situation is also clear to him: the board members should take responsibility and resign. This is not what the board members do. The proposal they make – to work again with alderman Brinkhuis - breaks with their own view of reality because they said the act they performed was the only way out. It does not take into account the 'political reality' of the council meeting. This would have asked for the resignation of the board and a 'mea culpa,' as Bosman indicated. This would have meant admitting the board is the weak player in the game now. The board members' not resigning helps to sketch their own character: as perhaps bad in the sense of 'only after power,' or at least stubborn. They are not able to see their own mistakes and learn. The credibility of the accounts of the board members is judged in light of the stories about themselves.

The board members were wrong in thinking that their storytelling, in light of their other acts, and their character would be accepted. Mayor Slotenmaker seems to see himself more as part of the solution than as part of the problem. He became active in the governing of the city in an effort to help out the other board members. He feels himself a chairman of the council and administers a portfolio 'symbolically between the council and the board.' De Groot is known to be a very good alderman, who is able to get things done. The alderman of the Christian Democrats is still recovering from a grave illness.

The story that seems to rule the evening, however, is one about some board members trying to get rid of a problem, thereby making the storytellers look like bad characters. They are no longer a part of the problem; they are the problem. The mayor is known to be ruthless; the alderman of the Socialists is known to like being in control; and the alderman of the Christian Democrats went along with the other two. Moreover, on the night of the meeting a new fact about the way the mayor treated his colleague is presented: the mayor did not even visit her colleague on his sickbed.[41] Some interview respondents argued that the way the board's proposal was presented did the opposite of generating the support that was needed, and it proved what they had been thinking for a while: the board members do not really know what they are doing. Reflecting on the proposal of the board, other interview respondents used game language -'incomprehensible move,' 'a blunder' - to argue something similar. This shows that the board members had not only little control over the collective storytelling, they did not understand the impact their own storytelling would have. They took their own stories seriously, and showed their human face with its own vulnerability. They could have realized, however, that the only way out might have been to admit mistakes and admit the 'political reality' of feeble support. They could have seen that the act that mattered was the act they kept on defending. The sense making by the board members reminds one of Czarniawska's (1997: 33) comments on institutional dramas: '[W]hen the dubious actions of organizational leaders are unveiled before a stunned audience, the accused leaders are apparently unable to understand why they are being criticized in the first place. They certainly had no intention of keeping their conduct secret; it just did not seem worth showing.'

This brings us to final meanings. When a decision has to be made the majority of the council members agree that the new political reality has to be enacted as an institutional turn-about. In accordance with Labor's proposed way of reasoning, character judgment is united with managerial judgment. At the same time research is agreed upon, but the meaning of this remains unclear.[42] But that does not matter to those who overcome, because their job is done and a fresh start can be made.

Hidden Meanings

In this process things that are normally hidden become part of public debate. What started with managerial and institutional talk led to emotional accounts. Nevertheless, various elements of stories did not develop and some were kept out of sight. The role of the leader of Labor, Panhuis, and Labor did not get the public attention that actors in favor of the members of the board would have liked. Panhuis could have been depicted publicly as somebody interested in power. But there is also a more specific hidden aspect of the crisis that can be found in the decision that is made: the council does, in part, the same thing as the board: the council sends away a board, *including* an ill alderman. And what was the political gain that the political majority got out of sending away the board? Somewhere between the act of the board and the final meeting, or a long time before that, various political actors had recognized the hallmarks of a crisis. With the board making a mess, the members of the opposition, even if they wanted to play a fair game, had probably seen and discussed backstage with other members of their group the possibility of exploiting the situation ('t Hart 1993: 41).

In addition, the council performs the rare act of sending away a mayor. The 'legality' of doing that is decided upon on the spot.[43] The institutional rule under discussion is 'if you are a council you cannot send away a mayor.' This rule is reinterpreted on the spot. The chairman puts authority in the hands of the secretary of the council: the 'legal side of the company.' This actor is allowed to formulate a 'formal explanation,' even though the leader of the Christian Democrats, Bosman, has handed out and read aloud the part of the municipal law that, in his opinion, indicates that the council cannot send the mayor away. The role of the mayor that is given attention is the identity of the mayor as part of the board, as part of the 'team' that failed. The mayor is rendered an 'ordinary' identity (he had already lost his institutional identity as chair of the council before the meeting started), someone who takes care of a portfolio and therefore falls under the jurisdiction of the council. A Dutch mayor normally is institutionally 'untouchable' - at least to a certain degree (the council does not appoint the mayor). As an actor who should safeguard the unity of the board, he should be 'above party' (see *Chapter 4*). The situation here is different. The mayor in practice has a limited role in policy making most of the time (Vlaming 2007). From the moment mayor

Slotenmaker started to take over a portfolio, he became a player in the game and had a hard time claiming to be able to be ‘above party.’ The case of the mayor becomes interesting if one notices that a possible part of the Board-Under-Pressure Story is hidden. This is the part of the story about the relationship between the mayor and some political party leaders. This time the Board-Under-Pressure Story includes more about politics than merely the coalition. Before the mayor obtained a new term in the municipality, some political leaders argued that he was malfunctioning. This did not lead to a resignation at the time, because the provincial authorities argued that these political leaders did not support their case with evidence. If we make the act of sending away the mayor part of the Board-Under-Pressure Story, we see that the problems with the Urban Restructuring Program gave the mayor’s opponents the chance to ‘settle the score’ with him as well. So, while the board members had been stubborn in their decision to send away an ill alderman, the council does the same. The difference is that the ‘political reality,’ as the leader of Labor calls it, is decided upon in the council and not by the board. The majority in the council can simultaneously construct and enact its own reality, so to speak.

Another part of a possibly hidden representation of reality includes the acts the journalists played as storyteller (though mostly the one from the regional newspaper). These acts include not just the introduction of the crisis metaphor, but also the publication of somewhat judgmental articles about the acts of the board and mayor. Although the crisis is certainly not constructed by the journalists alone, their decision to select certain metaphors (crisis), a victim (Alderman Brinkhuis), and a main villain (Mayor Slotenmaker) contributed to the development of the process. Other things that are ignored when it comes to normative leaps include the role Labor played in the various stories and what happened inside the Labor party. In addition there were other possibly important ‘details’ that could have been more central in the judgment of what happened, such as the housing corporation sending a letter to support the board members, the mistakes Brinkhuis made in a project outside the Urban Restructuring Program, the quality of the alderman of the Socialists, and the opinion of citizens in the area of the Urban Restructuring project that became problematic.

Putting the acts of the board at the center of attention also hides the acts and feelings of the civil servants and the organization the municipality had hired to help them with the problematic Urban Restructuring project. Some of these actors experienced what happened in the months before the crisis as very unpleasant. Overall, the ‘ministerial responsibility’ makes the aldermen more important than they ‘really’ are. The strong image of a crisis in and around the board hid the idea that the problems with the Urban Restructuring Program were not as big as they were represented at various times (e.g., a document that sketched the way in which the problems could be solved never reached a public forum).

Table 7.1: Overview of Practice Stories in the Crisis

Practice Story	Setting (time and space)	Events and 'meaning act board'	Entities	Proposed Collective Act
Weak Board Member	Board, last year	Alderman makes mistakes, does not cooperate, 'managerial intervention'	The board, Weak performing team member	Board stays on, Alderman fired
Bad-Board-Members	Board, last months	Board members encounter problem, fire colleague, 'unethical act'	Ill man (victim), bad board members, mayor	Unclear
Crisis	Political arena	Bad announces loss of faith, Labor redraws from coalition, 'beginning of a crisis'	Board, political parties	Council takes initiative
Board-under-Pressure	(Hectic) political arena during last year	Board members ill, Team member does not want to cooperate, 'act of despair'	Bad team member, Board-Under-Pressure, team	Board stays on, investigation
No-Good-Administration	Administration of city since Board started	Bad performances board, 'last straw'	Board, city (victim)	Vote in council, board out, fresh start
Tragedy	Coalition during last two years	Board members ill, Labor rebels, Board mistreats alderman, 'bad act that could be forgiven'	Board members (victims *and* villains) Leader of Labor (villain)	Board resigns and uses *mea culpa*
Meaning unknown/ uncertain	Political arena	Problems in politics, act board, '?'	Various political actors	Investigation

7.4 The Culture of the Case

In concluding this chapter, it is time to look back at the ways actors made sense of the issue at hand, and at the ways stories of governing were used to do this. The practice stories that were used in this case can be found in *Table 7.1*.

The Interpretive Process

The *initial meaning* given to the act by the three board members - three board members that announced a loss of faith in a fourth – was that of a *managerial intervention* against a weak-performing colleague. They did not present a problem as much as a solution. A managerial story of governing was obviously up front in this act. But, the struggle over meaning had just started. The opponents of the board - at first mainly the alderman and a journalist - reacted to the act of the board with an opposing story that framed it as an *unethical act*. It was depicted as a political fight that had turned into a political feud in which an ill man who could not defend himself became the victim. Whereas according to the consensus story the board members should have worked together, some of them had now chosen to blame the weakest for their problems. Although a large variety of meanings were brought to bear on the act that started the collective sense making, the opposition between those who condemned the act and those who defended it was maintained throughout the short interpretive process. Opposition was, in the first instance, also reflected in the different use of stories of governing. Whereas the board members made use of institutional and forensic language to talk about an act as legitimate and of managerial *necessity*, alderman Brinkhuis and a journalist engaged in a political story of governing when they talked about games and social relationships. The most important sense making acts were a coalition party leaving the coalition and a journalist turning events into a situation that was labeled *administrative crisis*. These acts took place simultaneously with the debate between the board members and their colleague. They helped to describe what was going on in a bigger setting, a movement that had already begun with the opposing story that framed the act as unethical. Crisis as a metaphor directs attention to what is out of the ordinary, turning the events of the interpretive process into a dramatic situation. The political battlefield was enacted, while the acts that helped to achieve this – redrawing from the coalition and naming the crisis - hid themselves behind other acts – the act of the board. With increased attention to what had been going on on the board, the board members and their actions became problematic. The need for a radical solution became apparent. It was clear that a journalist played an important part in the sense making.

The moment of 'truth' for the board members was the night the board was meeting the council. The set-up of the meeting differed from the normal conflict-reducing setting of a council meeting in Free City, and Dutch council meetings in general (Tops and Zouridis 2002: 22). This made a dramatic end plausible. The board members themselves started to defend their act as an *act of despair*. They now also used a political story to argue that they were the victims of the alderman. While they wanted to work together, the alderman broke the trust. In addition, one of the board members argued that the setting in which the guilty should be found is bigger. Despite and because of their accounts, the focus of the meeting remained mostly upon the board members, while other actors could take the role of audience and judge. The former coalition partner frames the act of the board members as *the last straw*, integrating the act of the board into a story about poor management. During the meeting the ill alderman is the physical proof of the unethical character of the board members' act, making further research redundant at that moment. The unethical character of the board's act also 'contaminated' the characters and the other acts of the board. Aspects of the managerial story of governing were called upon by claims about those who govern act decisively and make a 'fresh start.' In response a coalition partner tried to lend the board members a helping hand when he unveiled a political battle. This worked to form an alternative bigger setting in which the board members underlined the role of fate in undermining the governing of the board. He reframed the act of the board as part of a *tragedy,* in which the board members were *both* villains and victims. The use of a consensus story of governing was proposed, as the storyteller tried to find a compromise between the opposing parties and their conflicting stories. There was also room for a fatalist account of governing, in which being in control all of the time was presented as impossible. The board members could have enacted this tragedy if they would have shown remorse – mea culpa - and respect – by resigning. Nevertheless, the board members did not give in to the pressure to admit their mistake and thereby provided the majority in the council with the final reason – or excuse - for ending the term of the board. The board members suffer the consequences of their own acts, when the council accepts a proposal that stresses the unethical performance and the bad management of the board. The *final meanings* are those that stress the managerial, but most of all, the moral failure of the board members. At the same time, however, the need for and use of a vote in the council stresses the politically contested character of the process. This occurs while much of what is happening remains *unknown,* since various realities remain hidden.

Stories of Governing

In conclusion, the use of stories of governing can be addressed separately. This case was complicated because sense making and stories of governing focused first and foremost on governing itself. In light of the stories that were adopted and the hidden meanings associated with these, the overall picture of the case shows that the political story is dominant. The use of managerial decisiveness on the part of the board failed. The board members were too slow to realize that they needed other institutional actors to help decide what was going on. Leaving little space for negotiation, the board members themselves started the process that brought about the end of the board. This was followed by political fights and feuds that became both a reality that was depicted, as well as a reality that was acted on. The process became highly politicized.

Although working together consensually for the common interest is presented as the ultimate goal of governing and politics, it is depicted as dirty. The actions of the actors themselves would suggest that there were motivations based upon their own interests. In accordance with the dominance of the political story, the final meaning given to the act of the board provides a primarily one-sided view of reality: the board members have been insensitive colleagues and weak managers. The majority of the council proves itself to be a higher authority than the board. Although actors talked about the lack of consensus on the board, the use of a consensus story in the interpretive process - used to reframe the opposing stories and spread the guilt among more actors - failed as well. The actors involved did not engage in elaborate efforts to involve actors from outside town hall. The managerial story of governing was referred to constantly, but enacted most of all in its form of 'being decisive.' The reality of the case was already found without an intensive search for facts. 'Being in control' seems an important image in the construction of what happened and what should be done. The element of fate, referring to a fatalist story of governing, could not compete with the image of being in control (and the image of bad treatment of a weak actor). Perhaps the radical political framings were needed to construct a totally new reality, but a real 'fresh start' will most probably not take place. This is because those who feel that justice has not been done to *their* board members will probably not forget what happened.

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[1] I'd like to thank Paul 't Hart for his elaborate comment on an earlier version of this chapter.

[2] The city officially became a city long time ago.

[3] The new town hall is located at a three-minute walk from the main square. Built in the second half of the twentieth century, it functions more as a host of the biggest part of the municipal organization.

[4] In Dutch the first expression was 'laaghangend fruit plukken' and the second 'op een rijdende trein stappen'.

[5] Two months later I paid the town a second visit. Observing a meeting of the municipal council seemed to me the most obvious start of my research. Before the meeting started the director, dressed in three-piece suit, recognized me and advised me to call his secretary to schedule an appointment. There have been some interesting developments, he tells me. At the beginning of the council meeting two members of the municipal council (same party) were addressed because they left the council. Both seemed to have had enough of the political scene although the end of the term, one and a half years later, is still far away. As chair of the council the mayor gave them a CD with city sounds, made by a local artist. One of the quitting members said she did not feel at home in the council. According to her people said they would keep their speeches short and then started to read the first of *six* sheets. Nevertheless, she enjoyed the 'cock fight' but will miss the 'stage play.' The other quitting member told the audience that 'you cannot resign as a father and a loving husband, but you can as a council member.' This anecdote tells us something about the atmosphere that seemed to surround the council. Being a member of the council had not given one of the members a feeling of being at ease and had been too demanding for another.

[6] It is hard if not impossible to find out in retrospect what accounts were circulating at that time (there were many informal meetings in politics and administration, the high civil servants told their employees what had happened, etc.), but we can expect that what was in the press had reached all important actors. Throughout my fieldwork the actors working in town hall proved to be very aware of what the regional and local newspapers wrote. The newspaper articles, published in a weekly local newspaper and a daily regional newspaper, presented some first accounts. The newspapers also published articles on their websites. The local website stated on October 14 that it would keep its readers informed of the latest developments. In addition the board and the alderman gave their independent first-person accounts of what happened.

[7] In Dutch: 'Bestuurskracht en het bestuurlijk aansturingsvermogen'.

[8] The Dutch name for the national program of which this project is a local version is called ISV ('Investeringsbudget Stedelijke Vernieuwing').

[9] 'Reactions on Administrative crisis'. On October 18 the newspaper wrote about the night of the meeting, calling it a special meeting about the '[Labor alderman]-matter.' In the

other newspaper it is called 'vertrouwsbreuk' on October 14 ('latest news on the 'break of confidence' will be posted at this website, as soon as it is made public').

[10] The letter was sent on October 22, the articles appeared on October 14, 15 and 20.

[11] The others were closely involved in the matter as members of the so-called 'Urban Restructuring-steering committee.'

[12] Translation of 'paniekvoetbal': a way of playing football that is based on the fear of the opponent making a goal. The meaning of this expression in this context could be that the alderman argued that the mayor's actions were driven by panic.

[13] When I refer to party leader in this paper I mean the council member who is leader of the council members of one party. Literal: 'fractievoorzitter'.

[14] Unfortunately, I did not attend this meeting and have had to reconstruct it by reading the ('word-for-word') proceedings, listening to the audiotape that was made, talking to some 25 actors who were there that night, reading the newspaper reports and using the knowledge I gained attending other meetings. My reconstruction will probably be lacking on some points that my physical presence in the setting might have offered.

[15] In the words of the local newspaper: '[name new chairman] chairs this meeting, because mayor Slotenmaker is not independent in this matter'.

[16] In addition, there is a difference in the status of the meeting. This meeting officially is the continuation of the unfinished council meeting of October 13.

[17] Interestingly enough the mayor later on gives a clear vision of how he thinks actors in situations like this should act when he talks about the way he has handled the last weeks: 'You should not just draw conclusions on the basis of your emotions, we should think about it and next week we will discuss them again. I think that is also your role as chair. Make certain that everybody has the time to think "what am I doing," and arrange it so that people also have the time to talk things through in another setting.'

[18] At the end of the interaction between the mayor and the council some questions are posed about the various roles the mayor had to play as both chairman and board member responsible for this portfolio.

[19] The account he gives partly repeats the way he thinks about the case in his letter to the council. He says he has missed direction in the process and negative energy started to flow through his body. After going into detail on the various meetings the board had on the case, he put forward a statement in which he argues that 'story after story is given'. His illness has created a distance from the subject and he got (figuratively speaking) sick of it all.

[20] According to the leader of Labor it will not surprise anyone that Labor introduces a motion of no-confidence. Nevertheless, to rebuild the confidence, Labor also wants to start an investigation that will offer the municipal administration, including the council, the opportunity to learn. The account goes on to reflect on the reasons why things went wrong in the Urban Restructuring Program. According to Labor the problems are because the municipal organization is not capable of handling projects, especially not of the experimental character the projects in the Urban Restructuring Program had. Things had gone wrong ever since the beginning of the fourth-year term, and the whole board is to blame for that.

[21] The leader of the Democrats argues that the board 'has a big internal problem with which they should not have bothered us [the council, MvH]'. Since it is the council who can fire an alderman, the evidence to do so is not yet convincing. If the member of board would have formed a team, which they did not, they could have come to the council and the Democrats would have told them to just finish the job.

[22] The board, however, wants to ask the council to take two points into consideration. In the first place the board wants the investigation to take place on short notice. Secondly, the

council should understand that the board will adjust its availability to a level that is possible to deliver. The working pressure has been too high. It will no longer be possible to make workdays of 12 to 14 hours.

[23] Formed by the secretary of the council.

[24] Similar to the mayor but at provincial level, the one who deals with these matters.

[25] If you are a board member you… '1. cannot keep information to yourself' and '2. cannot make decisions alone'.

[26] This story during the crisis is told by the alderman of Labor, the opposition, the journalist of the regional newspaper and partly by the Christian Democrats.

[27] In the version Brinkhuis tells himself he talks about a man who admits that he has done things wrong, but also of a man who his colleagues knew he was more con*tent* than con*trol*. In terms of the stories of governing one could say that he saw as his strong point vision, not management.

[28] In interviews some added that the relationship between the mayor and the alderman was bad, but that was not used in public rhetoric at the night of the meeting.

[29] The council meeting itself is already a meeting to which the board members are invited as guests (since the dualization act of 2002), but especially during this council meeting the board members are asked, or better, ordered to account for what they did.

[30] The situation was also talked about a lot in the administrative organization, of which many members were said to have a good relationship with the alderman and of which simultaneously many members in their loyalty feel as if an attack on the board is an attack on them.

[31] The mayor invokes the interpretive process itself in his storytelling, pointing out the rareness of the situation and warning of the damage the actors could do to each other in emotional settings. This could be seen as trying to change the setting of the meeting to one that is less explosive, one that does not need radical action to take care of it.

[32] Only De Groot talks about the possibility that he might have done things differently, but at the same time he keeps on defending the act of the board members.

[33] One Christian Democrat talks about her 'buddy' and invokes the three musketeers, the Socialist says something had snapped.

[34] This can be said to be invoking the vision story of governing according to which all governmental acts are directed at the general interest. It is an effort to draw attention away from the board. Although the city in the sense of voting actors gets an active institutional role in time of elections, at the local level there are no elections after the breakdown of a coalition, as is the case in national politics. More than acting 'the city' serves as a reference point. Various storytellers use it to point out that the interest of the city is the ultimate authority. Both Brinkhuis and the mayor call on this ultimate authority, arguing that the city is 'what it is all about.' In his letter Brinkhuis states that the city and its inhabitants are more important than 'the truth.' On the night of the meeting the mayor argues that he has used a 'yardstick' that indicates the interest of the city. He asks the council members not to focus on what went wrong, but to ask themselves whether the actors have acted in the interest of the city. The way various actors use the idea of the city moves the judgment of the event away from particular interests or stories towards a 'grand' vision story.

[35] The new leader of Labor did not support the coalition and his own alderman, whereas his predecessor did.

[36] On various occasions opposition parties had supported proposals the board made, whereas Labor had voted against them.

[37] The presentation was postponed because of the crisis.

[38] Although it does not create a new reality, as Schön (1994[1979]) had in mind.
[39] What happens on the board is normally something that stays within four walls and only reported on in general terms that hide possible conflicts (Goffman 1959).
[40] The appeal of the mayor to care for ethics is laughed at (the mayor should have thought about that before, the leader of the Liberals argues) and Labor interprets the regret for the personal consequences of the alderman as expressed by the members of the board as crocodile tears.
[41] Various actors told me that this had shocked the actors present.
[42] Labor does not want to find the guilty one anymore and wants to learn. The Socialists think it is turning the world on its head to investigate while the scapegoats have already been found.
[43] Another arrangement would have probably saved the municipality a lot of money and effort.

8 The Outer Court

That is the funny thing about Free City. There are some sports fields here, and they already call it an urban restructuring area… Yeah, I just call that two sports fields that you're going to move… and you're going to build houses there. That's not very exciting.

A stakeholder

8.1 Introducing the Case

This case study examines the interpretive process surrounding an urban restructuring project in Free City.[1] In the first section of the previous chapter a short introduction to the municipality of Free City can be found. The interpretive process has been embedded in the context of a larger project that is now introduced in this chapter. After this introduction of the context of the project, the second section of this case study chronologically retells the process. The third section analyzes the process using the idea of storytelling as the way actors make sense. The final section reviews the sense making in the case through the use of stories of governing

One Program, Seven Projects

On the first day of the new millennium, the Dutch central government established the Investment Budget Urban Restructuring project.[2] This arrangement was meant to stimulate municipalities to engage in urban restructuring. The final aim was to structurally enhance the quality of the urban area. It combined existing subsidies in the areas of living, space, environment and economy. As the board of mayor and aldermen of Free City stated in an information memo in September 2004, '[u]rban restructuring is a "container concept." It is not only about physical matters like renovation, demolition and new housing development, but also about social, societal and environmental aspects.'[3] According to the board, urban restructuring 'should be directed at the older areas of the municipality, where situations of deprivation are present or threatening to develop. It should be especially focused upon areas where the physical structure has a strong influence on the living climate and the experienced value of it.'[4] Municipalities can get a subsidy from central government for the development of local projects in which they can decide for themselves how to spend the money. However, in order to qualify for the money the municipalities have to meet some criteria, of which the most important is the creation of what is called a development program document. This document must have been approved by the municipal council before July 2000. Supervision of the Investment Budget is delegated to the provincial authorities.

In February 2000 the board of mayor and aldermen in Free City started the Development Program Urban Restructuring Free City 2000-2004. This program was the local version of the national initiative. In July of the same year the council approved the program. In it the municipality formulated a vision for the coming ten years and the concrete measures that were to be taken during the following five years. The program text says that the program had been realized in close cooperation with concerned parties and had been presented to the population in an information session. The board stressed two points. First, it argued that additional investments should be made to areas that are not popular as residential areas and that often can be characterized by social problems. Secondly, sustainability was a matter that had been given attention in Free City and the board wanted to continue this. In the first instance the program would be developed into projects in nine selected areas of Free City.

Box 8.1: Planning Procedure for Plans in Development Program[5]

1. Initiation Phase	Ideas for the restructuring of an area are made into a project proposal.
2. Definition Phase	A first *concept development vision* is made. In this plan, problems, wishes and possibilities are investigated. Citizens are asked their opinion. Board decides.
3. Development Phase	A final *development vision* is made. In this plan the future functions and facilities of the area are established. Board and then council decide on definite plan.
(Beyond the scope of this chapter:)	
4. Preparation Phase	The definite restructure plan is made into process plan
5. Realization Phase	The restructure plan is realized. A contractor does the work. The local authority supervises.
6. Administration Phase	The local authority administers the district or area.

After the 2002 elections the new board gave the program a second start. This occurred because the local bureaucracy had not been able to work on the program as a consequence of lacking capacity. The new board and the local bureaucracy started to work on the further development of five subprojects. Later on, a sixth and a seventh project are added. The municipality intended to work together with the local housing corporation, which had already started work on houses located in the area of one of the subprojects. In October 2002 a project organization is formed, and a project group and leader are assigned to each of the subprojects. The project leaders were mostly civil servants with little experience as project leaders. They were being given the chance to develop this skill on the job. In November 2002 the local newspaper noticed that 'the municipality speeds up the urban restructuring.' In January 2003 the steering committee had its first meeting and the actual development of plans started (according to the planning procedure shown in *Box 8.1*). Before the summer of 2003, the Steering Committee decided that the finances of the program should be organized in such a way that the various projects could compensate each other. In other words, the deficit in one subproject could be compensated with money left over in another subproject. Some subprojects would be profitable, whereas other subprojects would cost money. From that time on various projects are developed more or less separately.

8.2 On and Around the Outer Court

One of the projects of the original development program initiated in 2000 is located in the neighborhood called West Area. The *West Area Project* started out as a project with two parts. The first part consisted of the demolition and the rebuilding of houses in the middle of the West Area. The second part of the project was concerned with the reconstruction of community-owned grounds that were occupied by a football club with two football fields and various so-called 'urban gardens.'[6] Water and houses surrounded the terrain on three sides, and there was water and a railway that ran through the city on the fourth side. In the 2000 policy plan for urban restructuring the municipality had not decided whether this terrain could be included in the West Area Project. The board first had to investigate whether the football fields on the terrain could be moved. The provisional ideas about filling up the terrain varied between building a tunnel under the railway, developing more parking facilities for the center, and building houses or building offices.

Two years later the interest in the terrain with the football fields seemed to have grown, but the ideas for it were still not determined and a new location for the football fields had not yet been found.[7] A difference with earlier plans was that the local housing corporation was considered an important candidate for the development of the terrain.[8] Since the first part of the West Area Project progressed rapidly, the second part of the project was made into a separate project in October 2003. After approval of the separate project proposal in March 2004, a town planning agency from a nearby big city was selected (from a group of six agencies) to design a development plan for this new project in June of the same year. The board gave the agency the assignment to make a plan with quality as opposed to simply building as many houses as possible.[9] Within just a week of making the assignment Mayor Slotenmaker stopped the project. When, some time later, the project was started again the mayor in charge of the whole Urban Restructuring Program demanded that the set-up be simple. Nevertheless, the civil servants wanted to involve the residents. After some debate between civil servants and board members, an 'exchange-meeting' was granted with the neighborhood and so was the organization of a sounding board with residents.

In August 2004 the municipality published a first newsletter about the project and distributed it in the neighborhood. In the newsletter the new name for the plan area was publicly announced: the *Outer Court*. This name was chosen 'because it refers to the past of the terrain, but also to the future. Court stands for intimate, small scale, a strong social cohesion and "green".' The 'Outer' part of the name refers to the idea that the terrain is not really part of the center, but neither is it part of the countryside. The relationship with the past lies in the fact that the first 'castle,' in fact a fortified house of Free City, used to be on the terrain, and at a time when castles had a court just outside their canals. The newsletter said that the municipality was researching the way it could develop a new little district on the terrain and had hired a town planning agency to make a development vision. This is a plan that sketches the functions and facilities that could be connected to the terrain. It was expected that the plan to be developed would include green and water among its founding principles. The people living in the neighborhood would, where possible, be closely involved in the plans. According to an article in the regional newspaper 'the possibility of building on this expensive piece of land has been the subject of conversation for decades.' Socialist alderman De Groot, in charge of the project, was clear about the fact that local authority expected to earn several millions of euros by selling houses.[10]

In Contact with Residents
On the last day of August 2004 the town planning agency presented the first ideas to the neighborhood in an 'exchange meeting.'[11] The meeting would be used to find out how the residents experience the area. In the local newspaper a communication officer of the municipality said that the local authority wanted to know 'what the people in the neighborhood thought of the area, what they liked about it, what they didn't like and what they wanted to do with it.' It is unclear what kinds of houses would be built in the area, although there was no doubt that houses would be built. The local authority called the attendance at the session big, 115 people, of which 60 for Outer Court. The meeting started with an introduction, proceeded with group sessions to discuss various aspects of the neighborhood and the idea to build in it, and ended with a plenary debate. It became apparent that the people living next to the terrain would prefer not to have any new district built on the terrain at all. In the view of alderman De Groot, who was in charge of the project, the question of whether a new district should be built was not debatable. The municipal council had already decided six years beforehand that the ground would be built on.

Looking back at the meeting some active residents stressed the 'take-it-or-leave-it' manner that the Socialist alderman used to defend the necessity of building a new district. He argued that the ideas put forward were not bad for the neighborhood, because it could have also been possible to build 450 houses on the same surface. He asked who among the residents present would inform people on the waiting list for houses that it was the residents who did not want the houses. One resident said that although the meeting was supposed to convey openness it gave the impression that many things were happening in secret. One of the residents told me in an interview that, according to him, all protests against building and the 'disappearance of green' were useless. Another said that although the actors representing the local authority should have anticipated that they would get many comments from the residents, they nevertheless showed irritation instead of making space and giving the feeling that people could have a say.

~Political Intermezzo~

Around the time that the initial ideas for the Outer Court were presented, things became hectic in the political setting of Free City. This occurred first in and around the board and then, in the second half of October, in the political arena at large. From mid-September onwards, the board members began to talk among themselves, as well as together with the political leaders of the coalition partners, about the way to deal with the problems of the Development Program City Restructuring. Meanwhile, residents from the New City Area showed their dissatisfaction with the subproject of the development program in their neighborhood. The newspapers even talked about 'an uprising' after inhabitants of one of the streets placed banners behind their windows asking the municipality about when they would get their promised urban restructuring. Some residents came to complain at the meeting of the Council Committee for Spatial Matters on

October 6. At this council committee meeting a debate developed about the expenses and the lack of results being made at the New City project. Mayor Slotenmaker (as quoted in the local newspaper) offered his apologies to the inhabitants arguing that '[W]e have not understood each other well. The local authority is busy working on an ambitious plan, while the inhabitants want to get rid of the mess, the weeds. They want more parking spaces, good sidewalks, in short a clean and safe living environment.' The mayor argued that the delay of the work on the program was due, in general, to the illness of board members. In the New City project problems were also the result of the high expectations that were created. Perhaps it was time to get back to 'the size of Free City.'

Soon after the council committee meeting the members of the board entered into a serious conflict which resulted in three board members sending away the Labor alderman. Labor (to whom this board member belonged) reacted by withdrawing from the coalition. What happened next was already described at length in *Chapter 7* as the administrative crisis. The reason the board members used to send away the alderman was that he had not acknowledged or realized his tasks and responsibilities on the urban restructuring (especially the New City project). For Labor, the way the board sent away the alderman was 'the last straw.' Labor had been unsatisfied with the board's response to various policy issues for a long period. At the end of the month October the council sent the board (including the mayor) home during a council meeting. In November 2004 coalition negotiations took place. The new coalition was what could be called a 'rainbow coalition' consisting of one former coalition member (Labor) and the whole former opposition, consisting of the Liberals, Green Left and the Democrats. The new coalition argued that, with only one-and-a-half years left before the elections in March 2006, it could only 'do what is feasible' because it 'steps on a riding train.' Just as in the period April 2002 – November 2004, Labor was responsible for the urban restructuring portfolio. Labor hired an alderman from outside the city to take care of the portfolio. This new alderman, Mrs. Smits, was a former administrator at the provincial level.

~ End Political Intermezzo ~

During the presentation in August the residents were encouraged to enroll in a sounding board that the municipality would form. The candidates for the sounding board were asked to give their motivation for wanting to join and could indicate who in the neighborhood supported their candidacy. Five of the fifteen people who applied were allowed on the sounding board. The sounding board came together several times to discuss various versions of the concept vision. The meetings had certain rules of the game. First, the members of the sounding board are not elected representatives but experts by experience.[12] Second, the sounding board is meant to discuss plans with residents but it has no power of decision. Third, in some cases the members of the sounding board can be asked to keep plans confidential, because 'this way, ideas that may be rejected later on will not lead to unnecessary unrest in the neighborhood.'[13] In the December edition of the newsletter the project group of the Outer Court looked back at the sounding board sessions and indicated the ways the plans were changed as a consequence of the members' input. Keeping part of the urban gardens was among the examples given.

A Concept of a Vision

In December 2004 the new board of mayor and aldermen approved the concept of the development vision for the Outer Court. The town planning agency had presented the concept in the form of a little booklet that was filled with graphic and textual descriptions of historical and physical characteristics of the area. It also identified plans for the future. When the concept plan was presented to the press, alderman Smits and the project leader stated that the estimated profit of two million euros, as predicted by former alderman De Groot, was unrealistic.

At the beginning of 2005 the concept plan was presented first to the council committee for Spatial Matters and later to the general public. Some 75 people visited the presentation to the general public.[14] Alderman Smits told the audience that the concept plan for the Outer Court was part of a deliberation between the municipality and the provincial authority. The motto the provincial authority wanted the municipality to adhere to was 'building inside the city before building outside the city.'[15] This meant that to be able to expand the city to the big vacant areas outside it, the municipality should first build on the vacant land in the city. These spaces inside the city are so-called *inbreidingslocaties, '*infill locations.' Smits also said that compared to other plans in the Development Program Urban Restructuring, this concept plan had been developed quite in detail. It followed the assignment to build a 'high quality living area that has a charisma in city and nature.'[16] The alderman added that there had been deliberation with various stakeholders and schedules the procedure to be taken up in the council at the end of March 2005.

An employee of the town planning agency presented the concept plan. In total 111 residences in three price ranges would be built. The concept plan also included rebuilding the castle, that was once located on the terrain, in the form of houses and apartments. There would be green and water in the new neighborhood. The restoration of old water streams would help to give the terrain structure. At the end of the presentation half of the audience applauded. During a break somebody said that the need to fill the vacant spaces in the city had become a 'licence to build.'[17] Another called it a sad day. He hoped the municipality would show some guts one day, but thought this would not happen. A third said that 'you can't escape it, but why does it have to be this high?'[18] After the break the members of audience had the opportunity to give their opinion. Almost all speakers criticized the concept plan. Some wanted to know how the municipality was going to take care of the difficult traffic situation; others thought the planned residences were taller than desirable for the area. When the town planner said that the distance to the castle would be quite long and that the castle would be beautiful, one respondent replied that it might be nice, but that was only if it was not in your backyard. Another stated that you 'should not compare heights to what is *normal*, because now there are no buildings.'

Reflecting on the meeting in an interview one of the actors on the side of the local authority argued that some residents protesting against building in the area were unreasonable. When talking about the reaction of some residents to the castle he said…

> Well, these houses [of the residents] all have very deep gardens, partly obtained illegally according to me. So, then you're already talking about 25 meters or something, after that we planned a green area and after that we started

> with the castle. And if people enter with a story like "this is still too high, our view is blocked", well… excuse me, but that is really too much for me. I myself live in a street where my opposite neighbors live ten meters away. And then I think, I think that is really unreasonable. […] [T]hat you discuss the principle of "this area should be built in", yeah, ok, I can understand, even though from a larger planning perspective I do question that as well. But that you are going to shout "this is not correct," this is looking in[to my house], it is too close… Then I say, this, this, this is really unreasonable. Out of proportion.

A civil servant said that when people who are against building are talking, it makes other people, with a different opinion on the issue, afraid to talk.[19] In this way the audience receives a distorted picture of such an evening. After the meeting there were people who came over to say that they liked the plan.

Apart from their invitation to the presentation, the general public was asked to respond to the concept plan in written form. In March 2005 the project group reported on the various letters that were sent in response to the development plan between the end of December 2004 and the beginning of February 2005.[20] This official 'report on views' not only described the reactions in a summarized form, it also responded to them. In addition, a newsletter gave an overview of the status of the plan and the answers that appeared in the official reaction. Besides answering various questions concerning the content of the plan, the report of views also made an elaborate statement about the need to build housing in the first place. The statement began with a description of the historical development:

> In the past, cities have been able to enlarge in the country site without obstructions worth mentioning. Gradually a number of people started to realize that the areas around the city have a value of their own. Think, for instance, of nature, cultural history, recreation, 'space' etcetera. This has led to the situation of nowadays where the rural urban area is treated with a lot more care. This policy has resulted in a change in the Regional plans for the province in June of the year 2000.

Residents Get Together

In the meantime some residents of the West Area started informal discussions about the project. These active residents came together to form a shared opinion on the issue and to talk about a strategy. There was even talk of taking more physical action in the form of blocking the road that runs past the Outer Court. In the first instance, however, the residents reacted jointly in written form. One of the written responses to the concept plan was a letter signed by 112 residents of the area surrounding the Outer Court. In this letter the residents asked that attention to their concerns, about the form of the building (its height and the consequences for 'greenness' in the area) and traffic problems in the neighborhood, be dealt with. One of the political parties also became involved in the neighborhood. The Socialists, in the opposition since the crisis, organized a meeting in the neighborhood to talk about the concept plan. De Groot, who defended the plan in August of the previous year, now led this meeting and helped the residents come up with a couple of problems that could be articulated. One resident thought the way the former alderman became involved was hypocritical, while another seemed to accept it saying that it was the same person only 'wearing a different hat.'

All together a group of residents started to be more active and the ideas these residents had about the way the local authority – in the sense of the board and the local bureaucracy - handled the case became increasingly negative. The following excerpt from an interview conducted with one of the active residents in that period illustrates the mood:

> Yeah, I do believe in the goodness of man, but in the case of the local authority I have my doubts once in a while. I have the idea that this plan was fixed already at quite an early stage. "This is how it will be, no whining, they will just have to swallow it. We do… we listen a bit, but… the plan is fixed, it is there, that is how it will be. Nice status object. I do not know who benefits from it but they will just have to do with that." The whole story for instance of the castle: On a certain moment the concept of a castle came from somewhere to indicate a housing complex in the shape of a 'U' and there is nothing that can be changed about it. It looks like sales talk, something with which people, whoever they may be, but at least from within the organization [local bureaucracy] can show off. It is nice in an advertisement: Free City builds a castle, come to live in a castle. Uh, that way you sell your houses of course. Reflecting a little more, looking a little further [you might say] maybe it does not have to just cover the costs, maybe the Outer Court with luxurious houses has to generate a profit for the New City [another project in the development program], renovation or for dealing with problems in [name of other neighbourhood] and that is what is hidden. […] It [this line of thought] is based on nothing, it is based on an idea and I have absolutely no evidence.

Although the residents who became active did not believe they could stop the development of the housing construction in general, and some were not totally against building as such, they believed they might influence certain aspects of the plan.

Debating Vision and Communication

The concept for the development plan, in a slightly changed version, became the development vision for the Outer Court project. The changes consisted primarily of moving buildings away from the houses that surrounded the Outer Court. They were presented as a reaction to the ideas that various people put forward in reaction to the concept plan. The council meeting at which the development vision was on the agenda was well attended, mostly by residents of the West Area. [21] A miller who operated a mill close to at the boarder of the West Area and eight residents of the West Area registered for the opportunity to address the council. Given the large number of speakers, the presidium of the council decided that the debate among the council members about the development vision would take place during the next council meeting.

All speakers complained about the planning of the Outer Court Project. They talked about aspects of the development vision that they did not like. Some of them stressed the fact that the development vision was not good and that the quality of their living environment would diminish. One of the residents said that 'a unique part of Free City will disappear.' The aspects that seemed the most important to the residents were the height of the buildings in the plan, three stories in some places, four in others, the modern style of the new housing, the way traffic will be dealt with, the presence of 'green' in the development vision, and the available playing facilities for children.

In addition to complaints about the content of the development vision, various residents argued that the local authority had not communicated enough with the residents. It was said that they did not offer the residents the opportunity to really have their say. The residents' ideas, and especially the members of the sounding board, only led to minor changes. Some residents referred to the fact that the members of the sounding board were forbidden to talk to the neighbors about earlier versions of the concept plan. At the first meeting, the members of the sounding board were asked to promise to keep quiet about the concept plan. A member of the sounding board requested that attention be given to the way members of the sounding board were recruited. According to him, the civil servant asked him for his motivation for joining the sounding board and stressed the fact that one of those who supported his candidacy fiercely protested against building in the area. He thought this form of inquiring was very strange. Another resident said that a civil servant had told her that they might consider the planning in front of their house as bad luck and could always ask for compensation money, *planschade aanvragen*, - a legal arrangement that is considered to be the last resort.

Alderman Smits responded to the complaints by saying that the plan under discussion was in its preliminary stage, it was a development *vision*. A development vision, Smits said, is 'a "talk plan."'. In the development vision there were still things that were 'soft,' but there were also things with more direction. It was said that in the next step, the concrete realization of the development vision, more interaction with residents would take place, that there would be much that would take place.[22] Following the alderman's response various council members showed their concern about the communication surrounding the development vision.[23] The opposition parties seemed to want to make the alderman responsible for the bad communication. The leader of the Socialists also asked whether the development vision should still be discussed or whether the alderman would withdraw it instantly. After one of the Labor council members said angrily that the former board initiated the sounding board, the mayor ended the discussion.

Reflections of Actors Involved

Reflecting on the discussion in the council, a civil servant said that the debate started with the content of the development vision, but took a turn towards the communication with stakeholders. This was a surprise, because in his opinion the board and the project group had carefully communicated with the residents. In addition, one of the reasons for selecting the town planning agency had been the positive way it treated residents. Moreover, being able to involve the residents had been something they had to fight for because the communication with residents had been, to a large extent, restricted since Mayor Slotenmaker had taken control of the development program.[24] Another actor argued that council members had used the image residents created of the development vision, and the communication around it, for party-political games. The council passed judgment on the spot instead of trying to find out what happened. Moreover, the integrity of the project leader was questioned, and she had not been able to defend herself. A high-ranking civil servant understood the reaction of the residents as defending their own personal interest:

> What I [just] said, people are always objecting to these kinds of plans. I live quite spacious in the country and there are three houses they want to build. Well, the whole neighborhood is in shock. For a couple of stupid houses. Go ahead and build people, I don't mind! The whole neighborhood is in shock. They want to keep what they have, that is the human conservatism…. And do they not want it out of their own interest, the residents of the Outer Court, or around Outer Court, or is it that they don't want it because it is bad for the city? In the last case they would have a strong argument. Because this of course is all personal interest, they want to keep their view. We're all humans, aren't we? My personal interest is more important than the common interest, up to a certain point of course.[25]

One of the residents, however, argued that, on the one hand, the protest was about more than personal interest, and, on the other hand, that the local authority was in it for the money:

> They invested a lot of energy, people, time and money in it. I think they will just… except in the case of a financial disaster… let it proceed. In my view, and I myself find this difficult, I think it is not at all a bad plan. I think the [town planning] agency has made a very nice plan. Only, I would rather not have it here. It is just… and then I am not talking about 'not in my backyard', because I do have a lot of space behind here [house of interview respondent]. I do not mind if there is a neighborhood, but I find it a pity. You know, such a green hole that does not have a purpose, that's just great! What you will get is a little neighborhood with *wipkippen* [common playing tool on Dutch playgrounds], a little path with trees and a ditch. Well I totally dislike that… So, I do understand it, it is a very nice place, and other people do deserve to live in such a place. But… because yesterday I also heard the tennis court [two blocks away] was probed on whether they want to move from here. Then I think "Ohh, such a whole inner city, it changes the character of a city." This used to be a little street with a lot of commercial activities, but that has of course all moved. There were flower shops. […] A football field, playing football in the middle of the city that is of course fantastic. But, yeah, parking, modern times, cars, parking problems, expensive terrain. It is of course all about expensive terrain. Even though the local authority keeps on saying it isn't.[26]

Still, a civil servant had experienced that people…

> draw in all sorts of things instead of just saying, well, I don't want this. Then I think yeah that is also a logical reason for not wanting something. You get whole stories about nature, while football fields are not nature. I consider somebody who says I do not like it as seriously as somebody who has a whole

> story about… butterflies or something, I mean. Like that makes a better impression if I… [talk] about nature.

Deciding on the Plan

After the first council meeting residents of the West Area went on protesting against the development vision. A group was formed that took on the name *Residents Committee West Area*. They put up posters, a banner was connected to houses on both sides of the road, and traffic signs were made that indicated an abolishment of castles (white sign with a red ring around it and in the middle a drawing of a castle), and a speed limit of ten kilometers per hour. On one of the houses a banner was hung up with the title 'Local Authority: Participation = the Deal,'[27] referring to the promise that was made to involve the citizens in the planning. According to the newspapers the members of the group and other residents were protesting most of all against the development vision of a 'castle' next door. One afternoon the residents organized a protest near the municipal building, letting their children build a carton castle and walk around with signposts that carried protest phrasings. Two members of the committee also published an article in the local newspaper.

In preparation for the second time the development vision was on the council's agenda, the project leader of the Outer Court project wrote a memo to inform the council about the citizen participation trajectory. During this second council meeting a majority of parties in the council shared the opinion that the maximum height of the new housing in the Outer Court should be three stories. In addition, they argued that traffic problems in the West Area should be dealt with when the new housing was to be built. Alderman Smits said a fourth story was necessary for the plan to be economically self-sufficient. Even though the board wanted the council to pass a decision, decision making on the project was postponed.

At the end of April a third council meeting in a row had the development vision on its agenda. Alderman Smits was on holiday. The alderman of the Liberals took over. This time four amendments to the development vision were handed in before the meeting started.[28] The Socialists proposed an amendment that basically said that the development vision should be redrawn. The Liberals handed in three amendments that requested various adjustments to the development vision: ordering the board to lower the houses and apartment blocks and to take the traffic of the whole neighborhood into account. The Socialists' amendment had little support in the council. When the Liberals came to the point in the meeting where they would normally put forward their amendments, they asked for a break. The Liberals and the Christian Democrats then went backstage to discuss the text of a shared amendment. Subsequently, the board went backstage to discuss a strategy. After the long break, the Liberals said they wanted to wait for the reaction of the board before putting forward the new amendments. The board told the council it wanted to stick to the development vision as it was proposed, but still taking the various comments into account. In addition, it promised to work together with residents and other stakeholders. It would make a process plan that included the way communication with the residents would take place. After a discussion in which the coalition parties said the promises the board made were satisfactory, the Liberals withdrew their amendments and the opposition parties (Socialists and Christian Democrats) showed their disappointment, the development vision was approved without any formal amendments. The leader of the Christian Democrats remarked that '[although] … the lion [the council] has roared it again acts as a lamb. The public representation walks out on the residents. The game has been played'.[29]

Soon after the meeting the regional newspaper wrote that the board had to rewrite the development vision for the Outer Court. The civil servants working on the project did not agree with the newspaper's account. Although the civil servants were not totally sure about the status of the decision making, for them the development vision had at least 'made it' for now. Even though they expected that taking into account the comments would give them quite a headache, the worst-case scenario (i.e., the amendments being accepted and the plan being redone) did not take place. The comments that had to be taken into account were 'matters that had to be researched,' which did not make them the same as 'demands.'

Epilogue

In the months after the decision on the Outer Court all, except one, of the development visions in the Development Program were approved. With the approval of the separate development visions and a new overall plan for all the projects, the Development Program entered a second phase. As part of the second phase the board and council also prioritized the projects in the program. The Outer Court project received the highest priority because the project seemed the most feasible.

At the beginning of 2006, just before the municipal elections, the Neighborhood Committee organized a political debate in the football canteen on the Outer Court terrain. Representatives of all six political parties in the council, three aldermen, and some 40 others were present. Although it was election time and many possible voters were present in the canteen, it became apparent during the debate that all political parties still supported the construction of a new district on the grounds of the football fields. The only one who questioned the necessity of building the district as it was planned – with more than a hundred residences - was former alderman De Groot, the new party leader of the Socialists during the elections. He argued that although the municipality has to build in the area it was not clear how many houses should be built, it could be 110 or just 50. The contribution of the area to the number of houses needed was not that big anyway, since the terrain was 'the size of a post stamp' (i.e., very small). It was up to the local authority to decide on the number of residents that should be realized. When another politician said the municipality had the duty to build houses for its citizens, the alderman said that the houses were not built for people from their own city but for people from the bigger nearby city. De Groot put into words a line of thought that was supported by sharp questions from various residents. These questions were about the need to build and the possibility of rewriting parts of the development vision after all. De Groot, however, did not get any support from his colleagues. Certainly they all regretted the way the residents were involved. Looking back, the party leader of Green Left even sketched an alternative that could have been realized:

> If you begin with a city restructure plan, or actually a plan for infill ('*inbreidingsplan*') like here, you can do it in two ways. You can say we as the local authorities have our own vision. We hire an agency for that and we let them draw it. That is what happened here. And then when it comes to filling in, the colours, perhaps the heights, the filling-in of the public space, for that we in-

> volve the residents. That is a plan.. that's the way you can do it. That is actually the way it happened here. You can also do it a different way. You can say that together we want some houses to materialize here. We want to make a certain plan together. Perhaps a nice green district, perhaps not. Perhaps very urban… And we let the residents who live around it, who look at it later on, play a very important role in it. Bigger than filling in a bit of 'green'. Looking back, that might have been a better way for this plan.

Nevertheless, except for former alderman De Groot, none of the politicians wanted to rewrite the development vision. The decision was made. Now it was time to work out the plan together, they seemed to want to say (for a chronicle of the Outer Court Project, see *Box 8.2*).

Box 8.2: Chronicle of the Outer Court Project

2000	July	Council approves Development Program Urban Restructuring Free City 1 (2000-2004)
2002	Summer	Development Program has a 'second start'
2003	October	Project The Outer Court starts
2004	July	Board selects town planning agency for Outer Court
	August 31	Presentation of initial plans to residents
	September-(Jan. 2005)	Sounding board for Outer Court Concept Development Plan meets several times
2004	December	Board approves Concept Development Plan
2005	January	Concept Development Plan is presented to Spatial Commission and Citizens
	March 31	Development Plan in the Council Meeting
	April	Residents Committee West Area is formed
	April 14	Council talks on about Development Plan
	April 28	Council decides on Development Plan
	July-…	Start Development Program Urban Restructuring Free City 2 (2005-2009)
2006	February 13	Residents Committee organizes debate

8.3 Making Sense of Urban Restructuring

Initial Meanings: Urban Restructuring Story

The previous section gave an idea of the urban restructuring project in Free City. Now it is possible to look explicitly at the way the issue at stake was put into meaningful contexts. In other words, this section looks at the center's planning again, but now as an interpretive process in which actors make sense through storytelling (see *Chapter 2*). The interpretive process that surrounded the terrain, referred to at a certain point as the 'Outer Court,' might have started a long time ago, just like the Center Plan in Heart-less Town. However, the collective sense making of interest started at the beginning of 2000, when central government established an arrangement for Urban Restructuring. The practice story that the board of Free City created on the basis of this can be called the *Urban Restructuring Story*.[30]

The central idea of the story is that there is something wrong in various neighborhoods in Free City and the board will deal with it. The setting in which the acts take place is the policy making of complex issues in Free City in the first decennium of the 21st century. The act that is undertaken is making parts of the city better, 'renewed,' through the development and implementation of restructuring plans. But whereas in the 'early days' (1980s, then called 'Urban Renewal') Urban Restructuring in the Netherlands was mostly directed at physical problems, the plans in the new millennium are meant to have a more integral way of dealing with those problems. The solutions are now directed at social, economical and physical aspects of neighborhoods. The program presents a clear political vision – dealing with weak neighborhoods - but also invokes ideas about integral management. The problems that endanger neighborhoods, such as the ones in Free City, are seen as multi-dimensional and complex. Central Government has offered the possibility to obtain funds for the development of plans that fight the diverse problems that neighborhoods are dealing with. The board of Free City has selected seven areas for urban restructuring. In 2000 the board developed their own program stating that what they wanted was 'a balance in sustainable urban development'. Stakeholders in the various neighborhoods (market parties, residents) should also be involved in the action. The neighborhoods and the city at large will benefit from the Urban Restructuring.

Building Inside the City

When the Urban Restructuring Program starts again in 2002, the project for the neighborhood West Area is split up. At that moment a terrain in the West Area with two football fields and urban gardens is seen as a separate opportunity for making plans. With the planned departure of the football club, a big part of the identity of the terrain will disappear. The board requests the civil servants and a town planning agency to make a concept plan for a new little district on the terrain. The *Outer Court Story* in the concept plan provides the residents with both a practice story about both the past and the future of the terrain. The way the terrain is framed, with maps and drawings, helps to reconstruct the old *and*, most of all, the new identities of the terrain. Various entities in the concept plan, such as keeping the urban gardens, restoring the 'castle' that was located at the center of the terrain a long time ago, and oozing waters that are said to form the physical structure of the terrain, help to tell the story. The entities connect the present (urban gardens) and the past (castle and oozing water), whether visible (gardens) or hidden (castle and oozing water), to the future of the Outer Court.

The invention of the name is the final touch in the creation of a new identity. The new name of the terrain itself, as the first public newsletter about the planning says, is presented as a connection between past and future. The name captures the new identity. It separates this land from the rest of the West Area. Before the first plans are presented to an audience of residents and newspaper readers, the idea of building on the football fields was already considered, but it was not concrete, nor did the terrain have a name of its own. In the first period (beginning 2000 - October 2003) of plan making, the project was at various times called *West Area II* or northern part of plan for *West Area*. The meaning of the land in the West Area becomes that of a separate district with an identity that was partly created in the distant past. This was done through research-based planning and is aimed at developing a vision for the terrain. It offers the promise of a new, high quality little district. In the background the institutional structure of the Urban Restructuring Program with its project structure, budget, and staff offer a larger setting, together with the legitimacy that the projects in this setting have. If urban restructuring is a good idea, so are the projects that belong to it.

To convince its audiences of the need to build on the Outer Court, the board also makes use of narratives about the provincial guidelines on building on the one hand, and the need for houses on the other hand. The *Urban Infill Story* has as its setting urban planning in Free City and the province in general. In the past, cities and towns in the Netherlands have been able to expand into the countryside without any obstructions worth mentioning. Gradually, a number of administrators and planners started to realize that the areas around the cities have their own value. At some point, the central government and the provincial authority decided that towns should no longer grow in the way that they did in the past. The nature of the countryside should no longer be the victim. Nowadays, the situation is that the rural area is treated with a lot more care. The provincial guideline that has been in use since 2000 is that infill (*inbreiden*), building inside of the city, should precede expansion, building outside the city.

At the same time Free City has to deal with a big demand for housing. The board sees in the Outer Court a terrain on which it can build houses. The setting is the municipality and the housing policy. The victims of the present state of affairs in housing are those citizens on a waiting list for houses. The Outer Court terrain offers an opportunity to do something about the housing demand. The new identity put forward in the Outer Court Story helps to transform the meaning of the terrain. The meaning the land is given with the Urban Infill Story is that of an area of infill: an empty terrain in the city offering the possibility for building. In addition, it makes possible a plan that is focused most of all on the grounds of the Outer Court and therefore feasible. Good conditions are then created, because the neighborhood can be built without any municipal investments. There might even be a profit of a couple of millions. The managerial story of governing plays a role, in the sense that the local authority sees a way to efficiently deal with a problem. This feasibility, however, is a character trait that the terrain only attains in relation to other projects in the Urban Restructuring Program. In comparison to other vacant spots *in* the city, the Outer Court is a feasible building site, but this is not the case when compared to building sites outside the city, which are easier to develop and do not involve possible problems with residents. The institutional relations with the province are also important to the identity of the Outer Court terrain as a location that should be subject to planning a new district.

Clash of Interpretations

The interpretations of the land embraced by the protesting residents in the West Area, mostly those living very close to it, and by the local authority are different. Although the local authority claims to have used a consensus format with the citizens, some residents argue that what is called participation has had a 'take-it-or-leave-it' character. For the first time a public struggle over the meaning of the issue takes place in August 2004. Later on, at the beginning of January and in the months of March and April 2005, fights are repeated. Some of the residents become active in their effort to oppose the local authority. They try to tell their own stories. For these active residents, the grounds of the Outer Court have a different connotation than the one the board wants to give it. They have urban gardens and children who play on those grounds.[31] Moreover, for them the terrain is, most of all, part of a bigger physical and social setting: that of the West Area.

If the terrain is looked at in the first place as a part of the West Area, the story about it proves to be a different one. It could be called the *West Area Story*. A very important part of the story about the future of the land is about the residents of the West Area and their values, needs, etc. This corresponds with resident involvement as one of the goals of urban restructuring, although the residents hardly use the notion of urban restructuring to make their plea. The West Area Story counters the Outer Court Story. Entities in the Outer Court story now have a different meaning. One of the residents refers to the present identity as that of a green lung. The castle, as a new entity in the Unique Spot Story acquires skyscraper proportions, whereas it functioned as a romantic metaphorical bridge to the past when it was adopted in the Outer Court Story. This shows how the interpretation of this castle metaphor is different from the perspective of residents. Those who re-invented the castle could not control its meaning.

One of the residents interviewed also had another image of history to offer. She said the disappearance of the football fields in the middle of the city signals 'modern times' in which terrain in the middle of the city is expensive and offers a possible solution to parking problems, for instance. The local authority ignores the uniqueness of that spot and the relationship it has to the neighborhood in which it can be found. According to the active residents, the local authority (they are not very specific about who that actually is) just sees an opportunity to get rid of *their* problems or, more radically, to earn some easy money. The irritation and the lack of openness displayed in the meeting in August have given the active residents the feeling that they do not know everything. Participation was supposed to be the deal, but never became central. An authoritarian take-it-or-leave-it attitude is what the residents have been confronted with. The local authority is hiding its real interest, which is making money to solve their other problems. From the citizens' position, the local authority is depicted, with the help of the political story of governing that frames it, as an actor that promotes its own values and interests. The active residents present the Outer Court as a unique spot in the neighborhood and even in the city. It is a spot that should remain, as much as possible, the way it is.

Alderman De Groot, who was first arguing on the side of the local authority, helps come up with the ideas that conflict with the Infill Story and that are in line with the West Area Story favored by the residents. When first on the side of the board, his remarks in the newspaper portray a take-it-or-leave it stance to the residents. This occurs by his focusing on the city earning millions with the Outer Court and then threatening to build 450 houses on the terrain. Secondly, De Groot facilitates the public protest before the first council meeting on the issue, and later on, in election time, stresses the fact that the need to build inside the city does not necessarily mean a whole new district needs to be constructed. In addition, he also claims that the houses will not be built for citizens of Free City but for people from the nearby big city. This undermines the idea that the board is dealing with a problem that Free City faces. Stripped from pressing problems that were part of the stories the local authority presents, the rule that the municipality cannot build outside the city if it does not also build inside the city becomes depicted as a 'license to build.' The local authority presents a nice line of reasoning that invokes a consensus story of governing, but the plan is fixed and the new district will become a nice status symbol.

Nevertheless, on the side of the board, the planners and the civil servants there are also actors who think the active residents themselves are only defending their own private interests. They argue that there is nothing new about what the residents say. It is just a regular case of residents who do not want anything in their backyard. This *NIMBY (Not In My BackYard) Story*, as one of the civil servants explains, is the result of the human conservatism. People want to keep what they have. For the residents, their private interest is more important than the common interest. Moreover, as another says, if you take the situation into account the residents already have a situation that is quite favorable – long backyards - a situation that probably came about through illegal means. Like the residents the actors in the local authority use the political story of governing to frame the actions of the residents. The image of residents with a NIMBY attitude helps the actors to argue that the residents are only in it for their own interests (Tops 2001). The local authority, so the argument proceeds, takes care of the public interest. This helps to legitimize actions that ignore what the residents say.

In December a rainbow coalition takes over the daily administration of Free City for the one-and-a-half years that are left of the political term. This new board uses the slogan 'to do what is feasible.' For the board in Free City this means only doing the things that can be done effectively and efficiently. A *Do-what-is-feasible Story* is created this way. This is closely linked to a managerial story of governing, in which it is not an abstract vision that is pushed forward but a set of priorities. Just after an administrative crisis (see *Chapter 7*), interpreted partly as bad management in another Urban Restructuring Program project, the majority of the council members identify 'do what is feasible' as the best thing to do for a while. In addition the board argues that it 'steps on a riding train.' It is not the political visions to be developed that are of importance, but rather delivering what government has promised in a more efficient way than before. Doing what is feasible and stepping on a riding train is analogous to the idea that putting words into action is more important than coming up with new words. Control should now rule over content. This attitude is also taken towards the Urban Restructuring Program and the meaning of various projects in it. In the period between the end of the old board and the beginning of a second Urban Restructuring Program (July 2005), the plan for the Outer Court receives the highest priority because it is the most feasible plan. It is not the kind of plan for old neighborhoods in which social, economical and physical problems come together. It is just a plan for a new neighborhood.

The attitude that the new board enacts should not be seen as a totally different way of doing. The managerial way of looking at the Outer Court and at Urban Restructuring had already become part of the storytelling during the period the old board was in charge. Even though moving the football club had not even been arranged, the planning for it started at the end of 2003. This shows that the local authority's planning started to become more hurried around the end of 2003. The reason is that the development plan had to be finished by the end of 2004; in order to apply for money from the provincial government for the second period of Urban Restructuring, previous projects had to be finished. Taken together the meaning of the terrain shifted from a place for urban restructuring to an empty space in the city that should be filled up, an *inbreidingslocatie* (infill location), during the period 2000-2005. The new board institutionalizes the shifting meaning with their political program and priority setting in the Urban Restructuring Program.

The connection between Urban Restructuring and the Outer Court project in 2000 might have looked like the relationship between a general principle and an example. It is important to point out that the story the local authority tells about the general idea of urban restructuring is parallel to the stories told at regional and national level. The problems are complex and, as a consequence, the solutions to the problems are not simple ones. However, as in the quote at the beginning of this chapter, the Outer Court plan is just two football fields. This offers the possibility to create a difference between the general outline of 'multi-dimensional problems in neighborhoods' and the realization of the Outer Court: a feasible, if not simple, plan.

As priorities of the board in Free City change we can see that the story about urban restructuring was just *one* possible story about spatial planning. Nevertheless, the concept of urban restructuring is not replaced. You could say that the meaning of the notion of 'urban restructuring' proved to be flexible enough to accommodate a large variety of projects with their own characteristics. In September 2004, the board itself calls urban restructuring a 'container concept,' which captures its undetermined meaning perfectly. The notion is able to include a large variety of meanings that are not fixed. This is similar to what a metaphor can do, as seen in Heart-less Town with the heart metaphor (*Chapter 5*). Urban Restructuring is stripped slowly of its meaning in the course of events that take place in Free City. Nevertheless, there are actors in town hall who seem to be afraid that the old connotation of urban restructuring might be applied to the plan. When, during the debate in the football canteen in 2006, Alderman Smits uses the phrase 'urban restructuring' to refer to the planning at the Outer Court terrain, she instantly corrects her own phrase, changing it to 'urban infill.'[32]

Final Meanings: The Show Must Go On

The clash between the local authorities, in this case the board and the civil servants working on the planning, and residents takes a new turn when residents and a miller complain during the council meeting. According to the audience at the meeting, which consisted primarily of council members and civil servants, the residents have two kinds of complaints. One kind is about a loss of quality of life. This complaint makes use of elements in the West Area Story, although the residents are careful not to frame the local authority as self-interested. According to interview respondents from among the audience, these accounts could not hide the NIMBY attitude of the residents. Without redrawing the plans, some of the comments might be dealt with. There are some complaints that the council members show their surprise at and worry about. These complaints form a story about the governing of the Outer Court project. In this *Bad Communication Story* the local authority has not treated the residents on the sounding board well. What happened was that residents joined the sounding board, but on the sounding board there were strict rules that gave the impression of secrecy. The members are asked to keep quiet and protests towards the plan are considered suspect. The council meeting proves to be a fertile ground for this story. Everybody should be able to speak his or her mind in a democracy and that counts for members of a sounding board as well.

Although the accounts the residents present contain parts of the West Area Story, the residents hardly try to fight the idea of a neighborhood as such. The residents seem to have given up the hope of keeping the unique spot and rescuing 'their' terrain. They do not have the means or the knowledge available – and do not use the ones De Groot, as a member of the opposition, hands to them - to make an alternative plan, although they speculate about it amongst themselves.[33] They do not really believe that they can convince the politicians or the board of their West Area Story, because the local authority will do what it wants anyhow. Therefore, they choose a different strategy: focus complaints on specific points that seem negotiable – traffic, heights, greenness - and on the process (Bad Communication Story). The points that seem negotiable are the ones that present a misfit between the new plans and the present whole West Area. One of the points that makes up the vote that the Socialists put forward on the third night of council meetings brings various complaints together into one idea. The idea is that 'the Outer Court is not on its own but should explicitly be seen as a part of the totality of present building in this part of the city'.

The plan will not be redrawn, as the Socialists propose. A thorough participatory planning project will take place next time. After hearing backstage that the feasibility of the plan runs risks if the residents are promised too much, the majority of the elected representatives ask the board to go on meeting deadlines and investigate possible changes in the plans to satisfy the residents. In the end, doing what is feasible and not demanding the board to run the risk of making plans that are no longer affordable, is most important. The only ones who go backstage to negotiate are the members of the new coalition. A political and a managerial story of governing are still clearly distinguishable. Looking back on the process just before the elections, one of the politicians himself argues that a more managerial perspective has been taken as compared to participatory planning that would have made more central the consultation of, and consensus with, the neighborhood residents.

Hidden Meanings

Both the Bad Communication Story and its instant success in the council overwhelm the civil servants working on the project. The civil servants believed that the process had gone relatively smooth. On the sounding board they had involved a group of residents in the planning. They had used ideas that the residents on that board had in order to make the plan better. In their view they had used the consensus story *despite* the managerial pressure coming from the first board (the one that was send away in October 2004). Moreover, it could have been worse, because the sounding board was the result of negotiations with members of the first board in a tense period, when citizen participation was not a certainty. Having had to fight for it, the sounding board seemed to the civil servants a victory rather than the total disappointment that became prominent in the Bad Communication Story. What seemed to be a logical rule for the sounding board ('if you see concept plans you cannot tell the other residents about them, because it might create unrest') is turned into a story about a democratic deficit.[34] One resident even insinuated that she and her husband were told that they might just have bad luck and should just wait until they could file a legal complaint about the planning. The civil servants were not able give an alternative account in their defense during the council meeting.

Table 8.1: Practice Stories on and around the Outer Court

Practice Story	Setting (time and space)	Events	Entities and 'meaning Outer Court'	Collective Act Proposed
Urban Restructuring	City, integral planning 2000-2004	Neighborhoods deteriorate, Central gov't starts fund, Free City starts Program	9 projects, Development Program, central/ provinc.gov't 'partial project'	Multi-dimensional Urban Restructuring in West Area
Outer Court	Planning in Urban Restructuring	Beginning Project Outer Court, government make plans	castle, oozing waters, urban gardens, 'old historical terrain, new district'	New district built with residents
'Infill'	Urban planning/ infill	Province sets guidelines (infill for expansion), housing need develops	provincial + local gov't, area outside towns, citizens on waiting list, 'empty space for building'	New district
West Area	West Area	Terrain in West Area serves function, new neighborhd planned to get easy money	West Area, residents, children, gardens, Local auth./villain, 'unique spot in West Area/city'	No new district
NIMBY (not in my backyard) attitude	West Area	New neighbrhd is planned, residents protest	Residents, local authority, 'backyards of residents'	New district
Bad Communication	Sounding board, Plan Outer Court	Residents join sounding board, members told to keep quiet, protest is suspect	Members sounding board, project leaders, rules	Residents are involved
Do what is feasible	Political arena	Administrative crisis, new coalition and board start	Alderman and board in charge, riding train, 'a feasible plan'	New district is built

The alderman takes up the defense of the civil servants. This 'ministerial responsibility' protects the civil servants, but what is not told is that the civil servants feel that they were not rewarded for the way they handled a difficult case. They had to fight to be able to organize a sounding board and did their best to involve the residents, but in the end they have the feeling that their integrity, 'the most precious thing a civil servant possesses' as one civil servant stated, is under attack. They were in fact caught between their own efforts to involve the residents and the demands coming from the board, such as to protect the plans against the risks of participatory planning and to keep the participation part of the project simple.

Even though the residents are seen as self-interested actors, the 'truth' of their story about the Bad Communication Story is hardly questioned in public. With this it becomes possible to see that, in this case, the citizens take the opportunity to become important storytellers, but the villains of their story cannot defend themselves. The interpretation of what has been going on from the point of view of the civil servants remains partly hidden. Even if one of the civil servants involved is given the opportunity to reflect on the participation process in written form, this writing offers no place for the civil servants' emotional involvement and disappointment. Other hidden meanings include those of the other residents, who might have been present at meetings but were afraid to speak up, and possible home owners in the new district. None of these actors take or get the opportunity to be heard.

8.4 The Culture of the Case

Now, at the end of this chapter, it is time to look back at the way actors made sense of the issue at hand and at the way stories of governing were used to do this. The practice stories that were used in the case can be found in *Table 8.1*.

The Interpretive Process

The *initial meaning* given to what was going on was that in various neighborhoods in Free City there was a need for multi-dimensional *urban restructuring*. After some time a small plot of land with football fields and urban gardens became part of the planning. With the help of a planning agency, the local authority designed a plan for a new little district that should be built in the West Area neighborhood. The local authority called the new district *Outer Court*. Old and new elements of the terrain were fused into a story about it. The elements of the story proved to be the building blocks of a new identity. Throughout the first plan for the land, it was thought of as an empty space in which so-called *infill* was possible. This infill was part of the effort to build houses for citizens in Free City. New houses were needed in Free City and the province demanded that they were, in the first place, built in the city itself – 'infill' before expansion.

For some residents who became actively involved in the *struggle over meaning*, however, the terrain was *a unique spot* and, first of all, part of their neighborhood, the *West Area*. This showed that, to construct a new identity for the terrain, its other possible meanings had to be ignored. Active residents protested in the neighborhood, in the town hall, and during a presentation and a council meeting. Although not said in public, for some of the residents the local authority seemed to be interested in easy money that could be gained when the terrain was sold to a project developer. A former alderman, who clearly stated that the local authority had the possibility to do things differently, supported the residents in their protest. The residents complained about specific aspects of the plan and the secrecy of it in a council meeting. The residents hardly tried to stop the construction of the new district as such. Alternatively, to many actors in town hall, the protesting residents were just showing their *NIMBY* attitude. The council members were worried when they heard about the way the communication about the project had taken place, i.e., the secrecy that surrounded the plan. The council seemed to think *bad communication* had troubled the relations with the residents. This communication should have been more transparent and the residents should have had the opportunity to talk freely with others about the plan.

The *final meaning* for the terrain was that of a feasible plan for which the future planning could be more participatory. The board and the majority in the council argued it was time to realize, instead of further debate, the plans and then managerially *doing what is feasible*. Slowly, the meanings had moved from a complicated integral approach to a basic approach – even if a district with 'quality' would be built. This move could be seen not only in the content of the plans, but also in the mere use of concepts to talk about the terrain: from (*part of*) *the West Area* to *the Outer Court* and from *Urban Restructuring* to *Urban Infill*. In the end, as one of the actors involved said, the plan is rather simple: '[…] two sports fields that you're going to move… and you're going to build houses there. That's not very exciting.' Nevertheless, the plan for the Outer Court had become an important plan in the Urban Restructuring Program because it was feasible. It could play an important role for the board and the coalition in the council that supports it, because it could prove that the new board is able to effectively make use of the opportunities it has. What remained most hidden were the efforts that the civil servants made to satisfy all parties according to the ideal of consultation and consensus in the planning.

Stories of Governing

In conclusion, the use of stories of governing can be addressed separately. The boards in charge of the Urban Restructuring moved from a *content*- and *consensus*-driven to a *control*-driven way of governing. The planning started out with a complex political vision that used and supported various ways of looking at neighborhoods simultaneously. The second board in charge put forward a vision for the terrain, backed by forensic research on the one hand and a provincial rule – and a treat – on the other. They made use of both the managerial and the political stories of governing. The managerial expression the third board (the new board that came after the Crisis, *Chapter 7*) used to indicate its policy philosophy, 'doing what is feasible' made 'feasible' plans more important than complicated ones. Complicated plans focus on the long term and involve intensive citizen participation. Already during the period that the second board had been in trouble, the board members became interested in results and wanted to keep its hand on the wallet. The settings of the sense making thus became small, thereby limiting the complexity of involving a bigger political community. With the help of a sounding board, consensual sense making was supposed to bring the identity of the terrain more in line with the ideas of the residents, but the effect of the sounding board was the construction of the residents own political stories. While the residents used political stories to comprehend the actions of the local authority, the local authority similarly used the political story to understand the actions of the citizens and react to them. The NIMBY image of the residents (compare Tops 2001) framed them according to a political story and worked to free the local authority from the need to negotiate intensively, or even to redraw the plan. Actors belonging to the local authority could argue that the local authority safeguards the public interest, whereas the residents only think of themselves. Taken together, in this case, the managerial story of governing became more and more dominant, while opposing actors used the political story to make sense of the acts of others.

An important last observation can be made about the relationship between the local authority and other actors in the municipality. Whereas in the other three cases there were a variety of stories around, there was not a group of citizens that was involved in the sense making in a similar way as in this case. It is important to notice that it is not necessarily that actors close to the local authority make use of the same stories as those further away from it, like the residents. When making sense of problems and solutions, citizens envision different settings, events and entities. The local authority itself does not have a very positive meaning. In the last part of the interpretive process it becomes visible that local authority and residents not only tell different stories, they also use another rhythm for telling them. This does not mean that local authorities or the council ignore the residents. It means that they do not pay attention to them in ways that allow a more-or-less shared story to be the basis for the planning. This might be partly attributed to language and clarity, as the political story would have it, but 'translation' does not remove diverging values and interests. Nor could it.

Following the political story of governing, the actors in the local authority agreed on one thing that had gone wrong: in its communication with the residents, the local authority had not been clear enough and had not offered them the opportunity to give their opinions. It is important to point out that good communication is not the same as an effort to come to a compromise or consensus. Following the political story as it was used in Free City and the Outer Court deliberations, good communication should try to involve two one-way communication acts. On the one hand, residents should have the opportunity to speak their mind about the plan in public and discuss it among themselves. On the other hand, the local authority, as an authority, should make *clear* what it will do and why. More explicit framing might make the different stories more visible and therefore debatable at various times.

To the actors in the political-administrative organization, it seems clear that the residents have a NIMBY attitude, while for residents it seems clear that the local authority is hiding its own interests. These negative images, which remain more or less hidden, seem to interfere with the opposing camps getting into a public debate. A debate could, however, be started between these actors. If we look, for instance, at the resident talking about parking and the prices of land that are more important than keeping what she thinks is beautiful (see *Section 8.2*, under heading *Reflections of Actors Involved*) and oppose it with the ideas an actor working for the local authority had about the selfish citizen who did not have ideas that are grounded in visions of the city (see *Section 8.2*, under heading *Reflections of Actors involved*), it becomes possible to see a debate involving not just stories about a terrain. These debates could also bring out stories about modern times, the city and the local authority in it. Maybe more than one or two meetings would be needed to get around to debating all these issues and perhaps find ways in which stories could be understood more fully or even integrated, to a large, extent if they would want to do that. Consensus does not come cheap. Like Forester (1999: 71) tells us about listening to a practitioner in the field of planning, '[f]or designers and planners [and I would include all actors in local government] who are impatient with process, this is bad, bad news: 200 meetings might be 199 more than such design professionals want.' But the gain would be big, because next to working on a plan this would also be working on public and political relationships. The civil servants seemed to have been willing to engage in this kind of planning, but they were constrained by superiors who were in a hurry.

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[1] When the fieldwork for this research started in January 2005, the municipality had just suffered a crisis (see *Chapter 7*). The direct result of the crisis was that a new coalition was formed and soon after the whole board of mayor and aldermen was replaced. At the beginning of December 2004, roughly a month after the end of the crisis, the new board was installed. One of the bigger policy issues the new coalition 'inherits' from the old coalition is the group of projects that drew attention during the crisis, the so-called Development Program Urban Restructuring. This program, which originally started in 2000, contains seven urban restructuring projects. It was considered an important policy subject ever since the planning restarted in 2002 and became a very sensitive policy subject in the year 2004. In April 2004 the mayor takes over the projects from his colleague and at the end of October 2004 the board is sent away, partly because a majority in the council agreed that the board made 'considerable mistakes in the steering of the developing plan for the urban restructuring and the accompanying plan for execution' (see *Chapter 7*). Although Urban Restructuring entails seven different projects, my scope is narrower. During my fieldwork in the local government, the interpretive process that surrounded this project caught my attention, mostly because of the 'noisy' meetings that surrounded the project. Although some might say that this noisiness was just coming from NIMBY residents, the problematic atmosphere that started to surround the project might be called strange. If we compare it to the notorious complexity of city restructuring in general and of some of the other plans in Free City, the plan for this project could be called relatively simple. The fieldwork (January-June 2005) for this study took place during the last period the plans for various projects were first presented to citizens and municipal council and then decided on in the municipal council.

[2] In Dutch: 'Investeringsbudget Stedelijke Vernieuwing'.

[3] Information memo 29 Sept 2004.

[4] Information memo 29 Sept 2004.

[5] Based on a municipal document. Notice: In practice names for phases and documents vary, according to a civil servant it depends on who you are talking to.

[6] Urban gardens are gardens maintained by people living in part of town where having a garden is impossible.

[7] Plans after the restart in 2002.

[8] Later on they are no longer considered as such.

[9] In that sense it was an ideal assignment as one of the planners said in an interview.

[10] Municipal reports at the end of 2003 also convey this idea. Later on, the amount of two million is mentioned.

[11] For the Outer Court plan and a plan in an area nearby.

[12] In Dutch: 'ervaringsdeskundigen'.

[13] Newsletter of Outer Court Project, October 2004.

[14] 55 of whom sign a municipal list. Of the people who sign the list, 25 indicate living in the area and the rest are interested in living in the area and some were contractors or real estate agents.

[15] In Dutch: 'inbreiden voor uitbreiden'.

[16] In Dutch 'een hoogwaardig woongebied dat uitstraling heeft op stad en natuur'.
[17] In Dutch: 'inbreiden is een soort vrijbrief'.
[18] 'Op zich ontkom je er niet aan, maar waarom moet het dan zo hoog?'
[19] Interview some time after the meeting.
[20] This response is the so-called 'zienswijzeverslag' (report on views of the issue). The period from the end of December 2004 until the beginning of February 2005 was a period of six weeks, the legal term for such plans.
[21] This meeting is also the first meeting that uses a new format for the council meetings in Free City. The council meeting in the new format first offers the opportunity for people to address the council, then the council debates issues, and finally the council make decisions on issues (that were debated in earlier meetings). In the new format the council meeting is preceded by presentations of plans and ideas in two separate sessions.
[22] Direct translation of the minutes of the meeting: 'een praatplan of ontwikkelingsvisie. In het plan is nog het nodige 'zacht', maar er zijn ook al zaken richtinggevend weergegeven. In de vervolgstap, de bestemmingsplanvorm, zal de concrete uitwerking veel meer interactief tot stand komen. Interactief betekent samen met de omwonenden.'
[23] One of the politicians I interviewed later said that he was very irritated by the way the sounding board was set up, because 'this way you put people in an impossible situation. You should tell people you can talk about it openly but it is all ideas, no more than an idea…'.
[24] A week before the meeting this actor had even told me that, though in August the residents displayed a large amount of distrust, he had the idea that they had started to trust the people on the municipal side, seeing that they organized a sounding board and published various newsletters.
[25] In Dutch: 'Wat ik zei mensen maken altijd bezwaar tegen dit soort plannen. Ik woon vrij ruim buiten en er worden er drie woningen gebouwd, nou de hele buurt slaat op tilt. Voor die paar rothuizen. Bouwen mensen, van mij mag je. De hele buurt slaat op tilt, ze willen behouden wat ze hebben, dat is de behoudzucht van de mens…… En willen ze niet uit eigenbelang, de bewoners in het B, aan het B, of willen ze niet omdat het slecht is voor de stad. In het laatste geval hebben ze een sterk argument. Want dit is natuurlijk allemaal persoonlijk belang, ze willen hun uitzicht behouden. En niets menselijks is ons vreemd….. Mijn persoonlijke belang, mijn individuele belang, gaat ook boven het gemeenschapsbelang… Tot op zekere hoogte natuurlijk…'
[26] In Dutch: 'Ze hebben er al veel energie, mensen, tijd en geld in zitten ik denk dat ze gewoon, tenzij dat er een financiële ramp gebeurt, dat het gewoon doorgaat…. En ik vind, dat vind ik zelf wel lastig, ik vind het helemaal geen slecht plan. Ik vind dat dat bureau een heel mooi plan gemaakt heeft. Alleen liever niet hier. Het is toch een beetje, en dan gaat het niet eens zozeer over, not in mine backyard, want ik ja ik heb zoveel ruimte hierachter, uh het maakt mij niet zoveel uit als daar een wijk zit. Maar ik vind het wel zonde. Dat je weet je wel, allemaal uh zo'n groen gat wat eigenlijk nergens toe dient, dat is zo fantastisch. En straks krijg je zo'n wijk met van die wipkippen en een paadje met knotwilgen en een slootje, nou ik vind dat dus echt tien keet niks. .. Dus uh, maar ik snap ook wel, het is een hartstikke mooi plekje. Ik vind het zelf een hartstikke fijn plekje, dus ik gun ook wel anderen om ook op zo'n plekje te wonen. Alleen uh, want ik hoorde gisteren dat de tennisbaan ook al gepolst zijn of die ook willen verdwijnen hier. Dan denk ik oh zo'n hele binnenstad, het verandert het karakter van een stad. Dit is van oudsher eigenlijk een straatje met heel veel bedrijvigheid, dat is natuurlijk al bijna verdwenen. Er zaten bloemenwinkels,. E woont in een huis was vroeger een drukkerij heb ik begrepen. En het wordt allemaal alleen maar

uh, van die wonen waar iedereen overdag wegtrekt. Om elders te gaan werken. … En uh ja deze straat was eigenlijk heel anders. Das wel jammer… Een voetbalveld, ja voetballen midden in de stad is natuurlijk fantastisch. Maar uh ja parkeren, moderne tijd, auto's, parkeerproblemen en dure grond. Het gaat natuurlijk gewoon om dure grond uh. Alhoewel de gemeente volhoudt dat dat niet het geval is.'

[27] in Dutch: 'Gemeente: inspraak = de afspraak.'

[28] Amendments are usually handed in before the meeting and put forward during the meeting.

[29] Part of the statement in the minutes of the council meeting on April 28, 2005.

[30] The general outline of different versions of the Development Program Urban Restructuring in Free City contains most of the elements of this story. The Urban Restructuring Story is for a large part the same as (parallel to) stories about urban restructuring in the general Dutch setting.

[31] In an interview one of the residents told me that an important function of the terrain is that children can play there more safely than on the street that runs through the neighborhood.

[32] Another politician during the debate also says that the Outer Court project is actually an 'infill' project. See the quote at the end of *Section 8.2*.

[33] In a later phase one of the active residents even calls the town hall to ask how much it would cost if the residents bought the piece of land.

[34] The subsequent debate in the council can also be understood through the 'political games' that were the result of the crisis. The Christian Democrats and the Socialists try to blame the alderman for the bad communication, whereas Labor points its finger at the old board. The alderman, who chooses to take responsibility for past and present problems, as an administrator is requested to do, tells the audience that she will look into the matter.

Part III

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Further Analysis and Conclusions

9 Learning from the Cases

> Most importantly, these stories are not just idle talk; they do work.
>
> Forester (1993: 195)

9.1 Towards Comparison

In the previous chapters four case studies were presented. The first case study was presented in *Chapter 5*. Actors in and around the local authority of Heart-less Town talked about building a new center for the town. In the second case study, presented in *Chapter 6*, the same local authority tried to cope with a sudden hole in their budget through something called a core tasks debate. The third case study was presented in *Chapter 7*. In that case the local authority of Free City entered an administrative crisis after three members of the board of mayor and aldermen publicly announced a lack of faith in their colleague. In *Chapter 8*, the fourth case study dealt with the reconstruction of a terrain in a neighborhood in Free City. This chapter will proceed from where the individual cases have left us. In this chapter the question is asked: what can be learned from the cases about sense making in municipalities in general, and images of governing in particular?

An overview of the literature did not offer clear ideas about how culture in municipalities and cases would work in general, therefore the most important principle for selecting municipalities and cases became the need to maximize the ability to learn about the general phenomenon under study (compare Stake 2000). In addition, it is important to keep in mind that the separate case studies in the previous chapters are thick descriptions (Geertz 1993[1973]) in their own right: they describe the meaning- making processes that could be compared with cases dealing with a similar content matter, or with cases selected for a particular difference in content matter. The uniqueness of processes will prevent us from identifying causal laws that could be used to predict what is going to happen in a particular case. However, this does not have to stop researchers from comparing across – and within – the cases in search of patterns and more general understandings. Moreover, it is never clear what a case is. A case becomes a case because the researcher is interested in a certain phenomenon. He or she decides what the case is. He or she gives the case a name and decides on the boundaries of that case. Even though the cases in this research began from content matter that was different, that does not mean that the cases do not involve comparable sense-making processes.

The comparison in this research can be conducted from, and come back to, three basic characteristics that the cases share. In the first place, the specific content matter of cases was dealt with in the same context: that of the municipality, and more specifically, that of the Dutch municipality. In the second place, the cases selected were similar in that they concerned issues that were deemed relevant to a large group of actors in a municipality. And thirdly, the cases involved some variety of actors, that is, they were - at least potentially - of concern to politicians, civil servants and actors from outside town hall. Whether these actors were actually involved in the cases was an empirical question. These three similar criteria across the cases allow theoretical ideas to be generated about the way sense-making processes took place. The fact that the cases were located in Dutch municipalities means that the patterns of sense making found are limited to these cases and are less likely to be expected elsewhere. The particular forms that their stories of governing have, and the relations between them, may be distinct to the Dutch context. Nevertheless, the generic character of analytical framework developed in *Chapter 2* makes the cases comparable to cases of sense making in complex organizational contexts at large. Theoretically, the relevance of the issues to actors involved in governing does make a difference, compared with other possible issues that could be researched. That is because this relevance indicates that there is at least some kind of consensus on the importance of the issue, which certainly is not the case for all possible issues. The involvement of a variety of actors might lead to a bigger variety in the ways actors give meaning to issues compared to cases that do not involve such a variety, but this can only be assumed.

Initial Meaning(s) of Issue (1) → ***Struggle over Meaning*** → ***Final Meaning(s) of Issue (1)*** → *Collective Action*

or

Initial Meaning(s) of Issue (2) → *Struggle over Meaning* → ... ...

Figure 9.1: The Interpretive Process

Points of Comparison

The points of comparison can be further specified with the help of the theoretical framework. *Chapter 1* presented the phenomenon of culture from a distinctive perspective (see *Section 1.3*) which combined narrowing the focus of the research to sense making, and more specifically to what I called the interpretive process (see *Chapter 2, Section 2.2*). The interpretive process is the period in which actors make sense of a certain issue with the help of storytelling (see *Section 2.3*). This interpretive process and the idea of storytelling provide concrete points of comparison. The structure of the interpretive process (see *Figure 9.1*) offers a way to compare the sense making that takes place in different phases in each of the cases under study. First there is a stage in which some initial meanings are proposed (*Section 9.2*). The second part of the interpretive process consists of a stage in which meanings are struggled over (*Section 9.3*). This stage is central in the current study. The interpretive process ends when some kind of final meanings are decided upon and some possible interpretations of what is going on might be marginalized, or another issue draws attention (*Section 9.4*). The hidden meanings, which are not necessarily linked to a specific stage in the interpretive process, will be dealt with separately in this chapter (*Section 9.5*).

Throughout this chapter the concept of storytelling provides the opportunity to identify how meanings of issues came about in the various phases. Actors in the cases told stories and, as Forester (1993: 195) put it, stories 'do work.' Stories help to make sense of what is going on, and what should be done. They provide and connect settings, events and entities that matter to the situation at hand. In this chapter I examine the ways in which stories were used to shape meanings and enable, or prevent, particular collective actions in their respective cases. In the context of municipalities, stories could be said to do the work of governing. In this study two kinds of stories were put forward (see *Section 2.3*). There are *practice stories*, which are stories about issues. When it comes to the analysis of practice stories, this chapter is not looking to find differences or similarities in the content of practice stories across the cases, but in the ways in which they are used. There are also *stories of governing*, which are images of the way the municipality is, or should be, governed. Making sense of an issue involves making sense of the sense making. This sense making might have been the issue in the first place, e.g., the issue is the failure of the board or its individual members (see *Chapter 7*). In *Section 9.6* a final statement is made about the patterns in the cases. The use of stories of governing is an important point of comparison for this research. In addition, while the content of practice stories is not central to this research, the stories of governing are. Three stories of governing were identified: a consensus, a political and a managerial story of governing. At the end of this chapter they are individually evaluated, as well as in combination with practice stories (*Section 9.7*).

9.2 Initial Meanings

In an interpretive process the initial meanings of issues are presented through the first practice stories. Those practice stories are used to tell what is going on. As a result of the selection of different kinds of cases, the interpretive processes under study began with practice stories that were different in content, but more or less similar in relevance to the actors involved. The issues, as initially described, had the attention of a big group of actors in the local authority and probably – or so it was assumed - of groups of actors throughout the town and the city. The case study of the Center Planning (*Chapter 5*) began with a big problem with a long history: Heart-less Town had no proper center. Although various attempts were made to create a plan for a new center and implement it, these attempts failed. The case study of the Core Tasks Debate (*Chapter 6*) started with three practice stories with a different content and history. The first description of what was going on was that the municipality had a hole in its budget. In the second and third practice story, the local society and the region were changing and this meant the local authority had to reconsider the identity of the municipality. Despite the differences in the practice stories, actors in the local authority agreed on the problematic character of the situation. In the case study involving the Crisis (*Chapter 7*), the practice story that initiated the interpretive process was hardly presented as a problem. Rather, it was presented as a solution. Three board members publicly announced that they had lost faith in their weak-performing colleague. Despite the unproblematic manner in which the board members framed their own acts, the relevance of the issue and the problematic character of the board's act, were soon made clear to all actors involved. The case study of the Urban Restructuring (*Chapter 8*) started from a story about a big problem that would take awhile to deal with: several neighborhoods in Free City needed urban restructuring.

In all these empirical cases there was a shared feeling that something was wrong and something needed to be done, even if it turned out during the process that the interpretation groups of actors had of 'the' problem was not the same. A basic but crucial observation that can be made about the work of practice stories, then, is that they help to construct problems, what has also been called *framing* in the literature (Schön and Rein 1994). This work will go on throughout all interpretive processes. As will become clear, the construction of problems goes hand in hand with the introduction of concepts that depict the situation at hand. The more specific point initial practice stories make is that the situation is bad and something must be done in order to prevent a crisis from taking place. This is what Stone (2002[1988]: 138-145) referred to as a 'story of decline.' The work that the practice stories did in the initial stage of the Center Planning, the Core Tasks Debate, and the Urban Restructuring was primarily to unite actors in the local authority around an issue, albeit through an ambiguous indication of a problematic situation. 'We,' as a group of actors in politics, can become the heroes of the story. The consensus story of governing was reflected in this effort to create the problem.

Consensus about the problematic character of the situation and the need to do something was important in the next stages of the interpretive process, because in those stages commitment, or at least support, was needed to get from problems to solutions. It also enabled the establishment of institutional structures, whether ad hoc or not (e.g., a contract, additional meetings, a working groups structure, an Urban Restructuring Program) that gave the sense making some direction and offered leading sense makers the opportunity to claim that there was no way back. Throughout the interpretive process leading sense makers nurtured consensus on the problematic character of the issue and the commitment to finding a solution. They sometimes combined this with efforts to make other actors share the problem. Sense making proved to be hard work. Or, to put it differently, meaning was established through hard work. This can be seen most clearly in the cases in Heart-less Town. The many meetings in both the Center Planning and Core Tasks Debate did not just help to work out the problem and find the solution. They worked to underline the importance of the message that the initial practice stories had: we have a problem and we should be working very hard to solve it. The hard work itself becomes part of the story about the issue. It is a reason why the process should not fail. In the three cases the members of the board of mayor and aldermen took the lead in the sense making, although in the Core Tasks Debate the board would almost instantly lose this leading position, if it ever had it. Corresponding to the consensus story of governing, a leading position did not mean trying to draw attention to one's personal or party ideas. Nor did it mean pointing explicitly at mistakes that other actors made in what happened before the interpretive process, or that might have even have caused it. Others might be needed somewhere along the line (compare Hendriks 2006: 93). Taking the lead primarily meant trying to commit other actors to a particular form of shared problem solving.

The Crisis was an exception to the pattern of the other cases. From the beginning of this case, it was not just an abstract issue that received the attention, but concrete individuals – members of the board - and their actions. The members of the board chose for a concrete problem – the alderman, and a solution – firing the alderman - that left little space for alternative views and courses of action. Helping to create their own institutional reality – a broken coalition – they did not have a way back either. They instantly lost the initiative, and the crisis that the board members said they had prevented only just began.

In sum, in the initial phase of the interpretive process, practice stories can be found to *construct* problems at hand. In addition, in line with the consensus story of governing the initial stories in three of the cases worked to *unite* actors around a general problem, and in the Crisis instantly led to conflict.

9.3 Struggles over Meaning

In an interpretive process the struggle over meaning begins once the initial practice stories are presented. Theoretically, actors might come up with alternative ways of framing what is going on, they may try to negotiate available meanings, or enact a certain way of looking at the situation. Although the term *struggle over meaning* might evoke the idea that actors fundamentally disagree over the meaning of an issue, this does not have to be the case. In order to compare the cases substantively in this crucial stage of the interpretive process, I will briefly review the struggle in the various cases separately.

Struggle in the Center Planning

The alderman in charge in the Center Planning, together with his colleagues, constructed a new setting for the problem solving. He said let's 'forget about the past' and go 'back-to-basics.' He was trying to create a reality of feasibility and rationality, contrasting it with the image of daydreaming and emotion that he linked to the past. In addition, a sense of urgency was created with the idea that 'it's now or never.' With the help of an analysis of the 'economically viable' center that the town needed, the meaning of the missing center was redefined as a missing *shopping* center. The range of possible solutions also became wider than before, because in order to divert the attention away from the eternal fight between two locations, three possible locations for a new center were added to the two that were fought over in the past. The primary function of the sense making, however, was still to render the meanings of the problem.[1] In the context of the location research, locations were made comparable in terms of numbers and were attributed a 'D.N.A.' This stressed their similarity and downplayed their particular historical meaning. The specialists from planning agencies, with the help of a 'multi-criteria analysis,' became capable of judging the suitability of the locations and, to some extent, partly replaced the politicians. In the end, the locations could be represented by scores on a one-dimensional scale from 1 to 100. A number of these acts reflect the use of a managerial story of governing. There is pragmatism (let's forget about the past), a call for decisiveness (it's now or never), and rationalism (feasibility and calculation). The past is used as a contrasting reality against which the new planning obtains a positive meaning. In order to paint this past, a version of the political story of governing is used (emotions, daydreams).

Later on, when a more general debate started, new stories brought about the shift in the meaning of a center. The heart metaphor became of central importance. The idea that a heart was needed for the town was something that all actors in politics agreed upon. If a center is like a heart of a town, something more than shops is needed. But the metaphor had a double meaning: there should be life in a new center, as well as love for a location on which it could be built. In response, the board tried to integrate the various meanings of the problem – the need for shops with the need for a lively center and a loved location – and the meanings of governing – a rational choice with a popular choice – to come to a compromise that should lead to consensus.

One part of the proposal signals this effort most strongly: the proposal of an 'organic link' between the two locations that was popular in the 1990s. This compromise was, however, not interpreted as such by everyone. The board's proposal involved choosing one of the two locations, which made it controversial. Moreover, various politicians argued that there should be a political vision. Pushing back the managerial story and the consensus story, the political story of governing became more prominent. Now the conflicting views of the problem and the way to resolve it became more visible. One of the politicians made use of the earlier enlargement of the setting, involving more than the two locations of the past, and proposed the selection of one of the three added locations. With this he proposed to give priority to the political story of governing, as opposed to a managerial story, and confronted the board with the consequence of the possible solutions that were added. The calculations, he argued, are no more than a starting point. What is needed is vision. It was not to be a center for the coming 30 years – as the alderman had claimed – but rather for the coming 100 years. The sudden popularity of this alternative accompanied critique about adopting an objective approach to deciding upon the best location. However, the report was not cast aside. The political feud of the 1990s, which was an all-or-nothing battle between advocates of two primary locations, was revived after being hidden from sight for some time. This specific version of the political story of governing shed a different light on the case. The issue of location was politicized and the relevant settings were enhanced to include more of the past, and more of the future. Achieving consensus among most actors and successfully reframing the problem of selecting a location became implausible.

Struggle in the Core Tasks Debate

Following a meeting in which the commitment of the politicians was assured, in the Core Tasks Debate the interim Chief Executive Officer and his compatriots (civil servants, board members and a consultant) quickly delimited the issue at hand to a story about financial problems. They excluded alternative stories. The problem took a tangible form: 1.8 million Euros needed to be cut from the budget - even though the actual amount of money varied during the process. A depoliticizing technique was introduced, the so-called zero-based budgeting method. All municipal activities and subsidies to societal organizations were lumped together under the heading 'products.' This made them quantifiable and comparable in terms of money, thereby downplaying their differences in meaning to the actors engaged with them. Identifying possible economic measures to be cut became the dominant way to solve their problem. This articulation of the Core Tasks Debate enabled the local authority to create an image of the municipality as an enterprise. As in the case of Center Planning, the first sense-making acts in this case reflected the use of a managerial story of governing. There was a call for decisiveness (rough decisions first, debate comes later) and rationalism (decision-making method). After having committed themselves to the problem, the politicians accepted that there was no other way to deal with it. They accepted the scenario they were given for dealing with it. This did not mean that the interim manager considered it pointless to maintain an image of consensus among the politicians. The interim was able to make the process look more consensual than it actually was. He invoked the image of a consensually made choice and contrasted the debate with a situation in which politicians only protect their own interests in endless debates. Drawing on a negative version of the political story of governing, the image of the weak politician was used in order to sidetrack a political debate.

As in the Center Planning study, negotiation and political visions received a second chance later during the process. Anticipating criticism about the way the Core Tasks Debate had been conducted, the board tried to integrate the story about necessary cuts with their political visions in one proposal. The proposal presented a new identity of the local authority, and a new relationship between the local authority, the local society, and the region. In an ultimate effort to reframe the Core Tasks Debate, the board wanted not only to show that choices were made, but also how everything connected to everything else. This effort can be especially seen in the new name of the core tasks debate – 'Choosing and Connecting.' But, the way the alternative practice stories and stories of governing were added on to what had been the most important driving force during the process brought about ambiguous meaning. The proposal, and the way visions were made part of it, hardly disguised a clear hierarchy between management on the one hand, and efforts to create political visions and find consensus for them, on the other.

Struggle in the Crisis

The pattern of sense making during the Crisis differed from the other cases and was apparent right from the start. The initial meaning the three board members (who announced a loss of faith in a fourth) gave to their act was that of an intervention against a weak-performing colleague. With this the board members were not setting the problem, but presenting their solution. A managerial story of governing was at the forefront of this act. In that sense the Crisis is similar to the other cases, but in contrast to the other cases the board members did not start from consensus about the problem, let alone from a commitment for a swift managerial solution. From the moment the three board members acted, the interpretive process became politicized to an extent that cannot be found in the other cases. The large audience at the final meeting showed just how much impact this had. The political story of governing became, simultaneously, the primary description of what was going on and a description that was made real through enactment. On the one hand, the opponents of the board, using the fact of the seriously ill alderman, described the board's act with a story that framed it as an unethical act. This depicted what was going on as a political fight that had turned into a political feud. It was presented as all the more outrageous because it concerned an ill man who could not defend himself, thereby defining him as a victim. In contrast to the consensus story, which prescribed that the board members should work together, some of the board members instead chose to blame the weakest for their problems. On the other hand, two acts helped to enact a political battlefield: a coalition party leaving the coalition and a journalist turning events into a situation that was labelled an administrative crisis. With the increasing attention to what had been going on in the board, the board members and their actions became problematic in themselves. The need for a radical solution became apparent.

The set-up of the council meeting during which the problem was to be discussed differed from the normal setting. This made a dramatic end plausible. At this point the three board members also started to use a political story to argue that they were the victims of the alderman. In addition, one of them argued that the setting in which the guilty should be found was bigger than others have defined it. Despite, and because of their accounts, the focus of the meeting remained on the board members, while the other actors became audience and judge. During the meeting the ill alderman became the physical proof of the unethical character of the board members' act, and no further proof was needed. Integrating the board's act into a story about bad management, the former coalition partner framed as 'the last straw.' The former coalition partner then proposed to send the board away and make 'a fresh start.' The aspect of the managerial story of governing that was called upon emphasized the notion that those who govern should act decisively. Again, Stone's story of decline (2002[1988]: 138-145) – things were bad, got worse and now we have to act – came into play as well, but now the tables have been turned. It was not the alderman who was judged, but the board. The things the board had done well were, for the most part, ignored while their faults were spelled out.

In reaction to these events a coalition partner tried to lend the board members a helping hand. He did this by unveiling the political battle that enabled an alternative, bigger setting to be formed. In this setting it was the role of fate that was important to the understanding of the board members' act. The coalition partner reframed the act of the board as part of a tragedy, in which the board members were both villains *and* victims. The use of a consensus story of governing was proposed here, because the storyteller tried to find a compromise between the opposing parties and their conflicting stories. In contrast to the other cases, in the Crisis a fatalist account of governing was also used to describe how being in control all of the time was impossible. The board members could have enacted this tragedy if they had shown remorse and had resigned. Nevertheless, the board members did not give in to the pressure to admit their mistake and with this provided the majority in the council the final reason – or excuse - to end the board's term.

Struggle in the Urban Restructuring

In this case a small plot of land with football fields and urban gardens became part of the Urban Restructuring plans some time after the initial problem had been set. With the help of a planning agency, the local authority designed a plan for a new little district that should be built in the neighborhood called the West Area. The local authority called the new district the Outer Court. Old and new elements of the terrain were fused into a story about the identity of that land. The terrain was described as empty space in which so-called *infill* was possible. This infill was part of the effort to build houses for citizens of Free City. New houses were needed in Free City and the province demanded that they be built in the open spaces within the city itself – 'infill' before expansion. In contrast to the other cases, citizens started to play a prominent role when they protested at the institutional settings of the local authority (the town hall, council meetings) and in their neighborhood. For the residents who became actively involved in the struggle over meaning, the terrain was a unique spot and, in the first instance, part of their neighborhood, the West Area. This demonstrated that with the construction of a new identity for the terrain through a planning story, other possible meanings of this ground had to be ignored. It also revealed that the story about infill connected the abstract interest of the city with the concrete opportunity of the terrain. Although the local authority did not present this view in public, for some residents the local authority was perceived as only interested in the easy money that could be gained by selling the land. The complaints of the residents in a council meeting were about specific aspects of the plan in relation to the neighborhood, and about the secrecy of the planning. Nevertheless, the residents hardly believed in the possibility of stopping the construction of the new district. Alternatively, to many actors in town hall, the protesting residents were just showing their *NIMBY* attitude. So, both the residents and the local authority made sense of each other's actions with the help of the political story of governing.

Summarizing the Struggles

This review of the struggles about meaning observed in the cases makes apparent an important similarity in the way leading actors – mostly board members, and a civil servant in the Core Tasks Debate - tried first to use stories to *delimit* the reality the actors were facing. This delimiting involved offering practice stories that helped to set concrete and tangible problems: e.g., a hole of 1.8 million in the budget. On the other hand, it involved creating a sense of urgency and restricting the variety of future meaning making. The leading actors proclaimed 'now it is time to act.' In their effort to narrow the scope of their problem solving, the leading actors used the managerial story of governing. They argued that both control over the situation and a firm decision were of central importance. In the Center Planning, the Core Tasks Debate and the Urban Restructuring, the managerial story of governing offered a seemingly clear way to deal with the problem, and more or less successfully hid alternative and possibly conflicting views. Additional framing and negotiating seemed unnecessary. The principles of calculation and expert knowledge helped to create or prepare solutions in the form of a location report (Center Planning), a method leading to a scenario (Core Tasks Debate) and a plan (Urban Restructuring). Specialists (i.e., planners and consultants) became important sense makers. The forensic or 'technical' stories and elements directed attention towards some meanings of the issues at stake. This highlighting simultaneously involved downplaying and hiding alternative meanings. Specific managerial or technical concepts were introduced to categorize elements and, in this way, supported the stories proposed, for instance, 'D.N.A.,' 'products,' an 'infill terrain.' The introduction of this new vocabulary was meant to depoliticize the interpretive process, or at least to prevent it from becoming politicized. This was most evident in Heart-less Town, where ascribing a positive connotation to the managerial way of doing involved explicitly contrasting it with other ways of doing. Most of all, the political story of governing and the elements in it were used to paint a picture of an undesirable alternative. When stories used contrasts, for instance between the past and the future, emotions and reason, talking and acting, they were not constructing a random opposition. They constructed the boundaries between right and wrong. In the Center Planning, the Core Tasks Debate, and the Urban Restructuring, the use of the managerial story of governing went hand in hand with the promise that a political debate was to come in the future. In the Crisis the board members also tried to curtail the meaning of what was going on with their public announcement. This was, however, not a successful use of the managerial story. Elaborate fact-finding before taking collective action was perceived as unnecessary. When it came to facts, the story about the mistreatment of an ill man proved enough. In all of the cases the limitations that were constructed through sense making were criticized, but the consequences were not undone. The initial consensus on the perceived relevance of the issue and the commitment to finding a solution seemed to have enabled the subsequent reports (Center Planning), method (Core Tasks Debate) and plan (Urban Restructuring) to leave their mark. The Crisis shows the importance of this consensus and commitment, because in this case the board acted without support from a large group of actors.

In the three similar cases and after the announcement of the board in the Crisis, there was a time just before or after publicizing their respective reports or plans, when criticism of the managerial focus led to the proposal of political visions or statements. These political visions or statements were reinterpretations of the issues at stake. In these instances alternative practice stories were presented or became relevant again. They worked to broaden the scope of the problem at hand. These stories focused on more abstract issues (for instance, a shopping center becoming the heart of town) and general problems (e.g., a poorly performing alderman becoming an administrative crisis) than they did earlier in the process. The issues were now related to larger settings in both time and space (e.g., a plan for 30 years became a plan for 100 years, 'empty' land became part of a neighborhood), and more actors were included in or took a role in what had happened and what should have been done. Specific concepts were introduced to categorize elements ('a heart,' 'a crisis') and in this way supported the stories proposed. Compared to the earlier concepts that had characterized the sense making, these concepts stressed the uniqueness of the entities involved. In reaction to and in anticipation of politicizing attempts by opposing actors, the leading actors (i.e., the board in the cases in Heart-less Town and a politician in favor of the board in the Crisis) tried to offer a compromise. Combinations of practice stories and stories of governing were meant to unify actors once again after both variety and conflict had entered into the interpretive process. This time unification involved not only invoking different and opposing practice stories, but also different stories of governing. These sense-making acts were efforts to reframe the issue or to integrate opposing stories, as prescribed by the consensus story of governing. Specific pairs of concepts supported these fusing or reframing efforts (an 'organic link' between Location 1 and 2, choosing *and* connecting, villains *and* victims). In the Urban Restructuring case the broadening of the problem, by the citizens, did not lead to a reaction from the board. The problem was constantly narrowed in this case. (Frost, et al. 1991)

In sum, the struggles in the cases showed similarity in the efforts that leading actors undertake to delimit reality with the help of both practice stories and the managerial story of governing. In three cases this was successful up until the moment that other practice stories entered and extended the sense making. These other stories brought variety and conflict into the process as the political story of governing for example would have it. This happened in the Crisis almost instantly. In reaction to or in anticipation of polarization and politicization, the leading actors in Heart-less Town tried to reframe the issue at stake. This was part of an effort to (re)unite opposing practice stories and stories of governing, as well as the actors who supported them. In the Crisis a similar effort was undertaken, while in the Urban Restructuring this seemed unnecessary to the main actors. Throughout the struggles practice stories and stories of governing were used to *delimit*, *direct*, *contrast*, *expand* and *unite* meanings of issues and meanings of sense making. Finally, at this stage it became clear that the practice stories and stories of governing worked to reinforce each other, and increasingly overlapped during the interpretive process.

9.4 Final Meanings

An interpretive process ends when the relevance of the issue has diminished. The diminished relevance can be the result of a collectively made decision that temporarily fixes the meanings of the issue or it can occur when another issue gains relevance at the cost of the meaning making directed at the first issue. When final meanings are decided upon, it becomes clear that some possible interpretations of an issue have become marginalized. Theoretically, there is no reason to expect issues to have a final meaning, since the meaning of issues will change even after actors make decisions that turn meanings into collective action, or move to other issues.

Using the threat of resigning, the board in the Center Planning showed its interest in winning the battle over meaning, at whatever cost. This showed that the board was aiming for not just *any* solution in the end. It wanted a *certain* political vision to be realized, namely its own. A majority in the council, in the end, supported the board's proposal via a vote. The Core Tasks Debate had the most ambiguous ending. Actually, it did not end at all. A new interpretive process partially replaced the initial Core Tasks Debate. This involved a new amount of money having to be cut and a means of implementation that was more radical. The protest by actors from the civil society was too late to radically alter the decisions already made at an earlier stage. In the Crisis the board was sent away with a vote of no-confidence that integrated a politically-inspired story about the moral failure of the board and a managerially-inspired story about the bad management of the city's government.[2] The first part of the managerial story, the forensic effort to find the facts that mattered in the crisis, was to be undertaken later on. Nevertheless, a second part of the managerial story, concerning the no-nonsense decision making, helped to finish the sense-making process within two weeks. In front of a large audience, the majority on the council played the role of heroes who were able to get rid of the bad board members. In the Urban Restructuring the planning would go on as the board wanted it, although this was not clear to the residents involved. The new board and the majority on the council argued that it was time to realize the plans. The plan would not be redone and the important revisions that the residents had requested were not decided upon. The Outer Court plan was the most feasible plan that board had and, therefore, presented the best opportunity to managerially *doing what is feasible*. The final meaning of the terrain was that of an infill area and for which future planning would take citizens into account. In contrast to the cases in Heart-less Town, the use of a managerial story of governing for Outer Court progressively gained force. This occurred in the shape of a plan at first, and later with the help of a slogan ('doing what is feasible'). During the interpretive process, the meanings of what was going on moved from a complicated integral approach to a basic approach, even if a district with 'quality' was to be built. This move could be seen not only in the contents of the plans, but also in the mere use of concepts to talk about the terrain: from part of the *West Area* to the *Outer Court* and from *Urban Restructuring* to *Urban Infill*. This move not only took place at the level of individual plans, but also at the level of the Urban Restructuring planning and the new board's policy making. Although planning might not have been according to the standards of interactive decision making, until actually arriving at a decision, interactive and consensus-driven planning were nevertheless depicted as something that could be done in the future, as well as during the remainder of the planning on the Outer Court.[3] It was then, at that moment, that they decided that the time for making progress was 'now.'.

The final meanings differed in the extent to which they became more or less fixed or not. The Center Planning, the Crisis and the Urban Restructuring had a relatively clear end with a decision in the council. Votes in a council are the 'performance of a public ritual' (Turner 1974: 39), in which actors come together for a final time to establish the meaning of the situation. There is however not just one meaning given to the issues. Final decisions carried various meanings of the issues in them. Nevertheless, conflicting meanings were not integrated or reframed in a manner that made two opposing groups join in consensus. What was made important in the end was the fact that *a* decision was made, not that the content of this decision was something everybody agreed upon. Managerial decisiveness was more important than a consensus on the solution. But a political story of governing with its focus on the content of a decision also played an important role, even if the actors involved tried to hide this. In the Center Planning and the Urban Restructuring, political force is used backstage to convince those who doubted whether the proposals of the board were the right ones. In the Center Planning and Crisis, the votes on proposals in a final council meeting, and the uncertainty of the outcome of these votes, showed that the struggles over meaning ended in a fierce battle with winners and losers. These fights could be interpreted as fights between political enemies, but might also be seen as fights between boards and councils.

In sum, through the ritual of public voting three sense-making processes came to a temporary end. This involved uniting various practice stories and stories of governing, as well as tying up problems to solutions. Combinations of earlier practice stories can be said to have worked together at this stage, since the various ways of looking at reality that they now offered helped a majority on the council agree on a course of action. So even though ambiguity remained, or became part of final accounts, reconciliation between opposing camps did not happen in any of the cases. The consensus story could be replaced with a political story, since what mattered was a majority on the council. In the Core Tasks Debate the sense making did not really end at a clear point in time, since the sense making took a new turn and decisions were scattered.

9.5 Hidden Meanings

In addition to initial meanings, meanings that are constructed in a struggle over meaning, and final meanings, there are hidden meanings. Actors might, either deliberately or not, be hiding views of realities they are, or are not, aware of. By reconstructing these interpretations, researchers can show how establishing the meanings of one group of actors can be done at the expense of the realities of other groups. Looking for hidden meanings does not involve focusing on those meanings that became marginalized during the public struggle over meaning – those have been dealt with already, but focusing on those that never or hardly became part of the public meaning making. Although the meanings that are hidden might take the form of stories in the interpretive processes, they can also be no more than lost fragments (e.g., settings, events, and entities) that were not turned into a story about the situation at hand.

In the Center Planning a story that was hidden questioned the center planning. According to this story the politicians in Heart-less Town were blind to the fact there was no real support for a new center among the citizens. The idea that there should be societal support for a new center was in line with the version of the consensus story of governing that argued that the municipality should be a local community that seeks the highest degree of consensus possible through consultation and compromises. In the Center Planning this demand was recognized, but at the same time treated like a problematic ideal. In the board's view, societal support as a criterion is impossible to establish in the same way as the other, more or less technical criteria. The board labeled societal support as something the board members themselves had to gain insight into. Opportunities to gain a sort of 'measurement' in the form of a referendum or a survey to find out which location had the most support among the citizens were not used. Discussions in and around the meetings of the council committee did not lead to a clear establishment of societal support, or even the way societal support could be established. Moreover, the board never asked whether the actors present in meetings supported one or another location, let alone whether they even supported the construction of a new center. The conclusion can be that, although the board invoked and espoused a participatory version of the consensus story, it actually held on to its own managerial story. Calling meetings with groups of citizens a 'one-way communication' event – the board first and foremost told the citizens what it was up to - clearly demonstrated the limits of the kind of dialogue the board was willing to enter into. The result of the way the board dealt with the issue was that the local authority in Heart-less Town was pursuing a center that did not have the support of its citizens. The citizens might have argued that there was no center problem in the first place, and thus there was nothing that should be done about it. Political parties in the council did not try to uncover this possible reality either. The focus on a battle between two locations made most political actors take the legitimacy of the planning effort for granted, making elaborate deliberation superfluous.

In the Core Tasks Debate stories by actors outside the town hall were also lacking. Efforts were made to include citizens and members of civil society during the process, but these efforts were limited. These actors' opinions were not asked for during the period in which important decisions were made. In addition, the two conferences and many meetings of the Core Tasks Debate were not freely accessible for citizens and members of civil society. Not only did the sense makers ignore or refrain from looking for stories that the citizens and members of civil society might have had, they also pursued an interpretive process that was itself in large part hidden. An effort to govern in a way that makes citizens more central was used for the board's proposal, but took the pre-structured managerial style that resembled the zero-based budgeting: a survey. Moreover, as in the Center Planning case, the results of the survey were used as a touchstone and not as the starting point. Later in the process, members of civil society were asked to play a role in the policy making, but this role was limited to providing information. Although the board did its best to reframe the process with the help of a proposal, it is questionable whether this proposal reflected the sense making as it had been experienced by other actors (e.g., the members of civil society). The new world of political visions and negotiation is one that existed primarily on paper. The proposal of the board, although by and large accepted by the council, was not convincing for everybody and was hardly able to hide that there were only a limited variety of actors included in the interpretive process. Civil servants and politicians were governing for the most part alone. First cuts were decided upon, then information was gained, and finally a vision was added. It would have been better if politics had been first, followed by consensus making and finally implementation. The protest, however, did not lead to a different way of governing. In sum, the meaning citizens and actors in civil society might have given to what was going on and what should be done remained undeveloped until the moment the consequences were unavoidable.

In contrast to the Core Tasks Debate, in the Crisis a lot of what was hidden became public. Differences in opinion on the board and problems of a social nature normally remain hidden. The board is supposed to act as a unit. In the Crisis, however, backstage became front stage (Goffman 1959). What can be seen in this case is a version of the political story in which adversaries turn into enemies (Edelman 1988). But we should not forget that a crisis is not a natural phenomenon as much as it is a meaning construct. Actors stimulated the image of a crisis. What remained more or less hidden was that those who complained about the problems on the board (i.e., opposition members and the party that left the coalition) had an interest in the crisis themselves. By sending the board away, they helped to fire an ill man after all *and* solve a more hidden battle with the mayor. In addition, stories about the role of other actors beyond the immediate political level, such as the journalist, civil servants and stakeholders, remained hidden. What can be learned from this is that even - or especially - when what normally happens backstage is shown on the stage, it can divert the attention from the many things that are happening in both places.

While in the first three cases the citizens' voices were hardly heard, in the Urban Restructuring the stories by actors in the town became part of the interpretive process. Although the civil servants believed that the process had been relatively smooth, the residents showed their discontent. Due to the format of council meetings in municipalities, civil servants are not able give an alternative account in their own defense. The alderman, therefore, took up defending the civil servants. This 'ministerial responsibility' protected the civil servants, but what was not showed was that the civil servants felt that they were not rewarded for the way they had handled a difficult case. The interpretation of what had been going on from the civil servants' points of view, remained partly hidden. In sum, the meaning residents gave to what had happened highlighted the civil servants as villains, while hiding their effort to safeguard a balance between demands coming from two sides. What can be learned from this is that the attention citizens or residents give to their realities might make individual civil servants vulnerable.

The meanings that were hidden in the Center Planning, the Core Tasks Debate and the Crisis were those of actors outside town hall. Although the version of the consensus story in which the citizens and civil society were actively involved was invoked various times, dialogue and debate were not used elaborately. Participatory sense making was depicted as standing in the way of solving the problem at hand, because it would take too long and involve actors who only defended their own interests and values. Even if consensus among a bigger group than those in politics were said to be the ideal, it was treated as an unrealistic ideal. In these three cases it became clear that some stories that the citizens or civil society told were seen as superfluous or feared. Although the same might be true of the Urban Restructuring, here the citizens actively engaged in their own public storytelling before decisions were made. The result of the residents' involvement, however, contributed to the absence of more personal accounts of civil servants who were engaged in the process. The Crisis in a similar way showed that attention to some accounts that are less heard of in normal practice can draw attention away from other accounts. These could have obtained equal attention if the sense making had been different.

In sum, the realities of the actors outside of town hall were mostly hidden, in particular those in Heart-less Town. The hidden meanings in these cases painfully illustrate that if actors make sense of what is going on, it occurs at the cost of alternatives. They show the downside of the work that stories perform. What can actually be seen in the reconstruction of hidden interpretations is the work done by the stories that *are* present. But that does not mean that bringing in alternative views or uncovering hidden views of reality is only beneficial, since these hidden views are also partial.

9.6 Four Interpretive Processes

A comparison of the cases indicates that there is not just *one* interpretive process. This observation does not come as a surprise. At the same time it would be hard to defend the idea that differences between interpretive processes could be attributed to the fact that actors are dealing with different content matters. In addition, as the cases clearly illustrated, the meaning of issues changed during the interpretive process. New practice stories were presented, earlier ones altered or combined, giving the case itself new meaning. For instance, what used to be a case of urban restructuring ended up being a case of urban *infill*.

A view of interpretive processes as unique would ignore the similarities that appeared in the processes. As the previous sections have shown, there are important similarities in the cases when it comes to the use of stories in them (see also *Section 9.7*). The consensual starting point, the dominance of the managerial story of governing at the beginning, and subsequent rise of conflict and expansion of meaning in three of the cases, were the most striking similarities. The difference between these features and what happened in the Crisis makes looking more closely at the Crisis case a way to understand what is normal.[4] Two cases took place *after* an administrative crisis (Core

Tasks Debate, Urban Restructuring) and one case *after* a big planning failure (Center Planning, also has a crisis in the middle). Important leading sense makers (i.e.,, the new alderman, the interim manager, the new board) were actors who took over from others who had failed. This may account, in part, for the dominance of the managerial story, as crisis and failure can 'lead to' central control. *A* decision in such a case might become more important than *the perfect* decision. The way the Crisis came to an end – a radical decision that facilitates 'a fresh start' - also demonstrated this dynamic. But, again with the Crisis case in mind, the crisis atmosphere and the image of past failure had to be (re)created and subsequently nurtured in order to have its effect. It is too easy to infer from this that crisis leads to the use of the managerial story.

Another similarity in all the cases is the way in which the citizens are kept out of the sense making. The importance of societal support is expressed in speeches and everybody in town hall will say that they are 'doing it for *the citizens* (or even more abstractly, *the city*),' but this does not lead to what could be called sense making by the citizens and civil society. Citizens and civil society have a standing invitation to public meetings, but when it comes to defining the problems and solutions, citizens seem to be hidden from sight. How can this be understood? This research was not directed at the formulation of an answer to this question, but it is not hard to come up with possible answers. The stories of the citizens and civil society might be too complex, too difficult to handle; they might endanger the process towards results; or, more cynically, stories from outside town hall might prevent actors in town hall from getting what they want.

Finally, it should be pointed out that the two cases in Heart-less Town have another striking similarity, namely in the way the board tried to integrate various practice stories, and stories of governing in their proposals. Whether in anticipation of or reaction to what others might have thought about their narratives, the board members decided that they had to look for compromise. But again, even though the cases in Heart-less Town had the form of a *consensus – methodical management – conflict – compromise - and a certain disregard for actors outside town hall*, this did not mean the municipality had one kind of sense making. The differences between the two processes in Heart-less Town should not be forgotten. The most striking differences were the way in which the processes 'ended' and the public's nature. The Center Planning had a clear finale, with winners and losers, whereas the Core Tasks Debate did not. In the Center Planning the sense making – although in a controlled way – was clearly a public affair that got openly politicized, the Core Tasks Debate, by contrast, was hidden from citizens and civil society for a long time.

9.7 Stories Revisited

In ending this chapter I will flesh out some lessons about the use and content of stories of governing and the use of stories in general.

Stories of Governing

Since this research has a special interest in the use of stories of governing, a summary is presented here of what has been learned about them. There are both similarities and differences in the way stories of governing are used. Three cases – Center Planning, Core Tasks Debate and Urban Restructuring - were similar in the dominant presence of the managerial story of governing at the beginning of the process. In these three cases, the managerial story of governing more or less successfully hid alternative and possibly conflicting views. It offered a way of dealing with the problem in the form of methods and techniques. This helped to depoliticize the sense-making process, or at least to prevent it from becoming politicized. In these three cases the use of the managerial story of governing was supported by the promise that political debate would come in the future. In the Crisis the board members also tried to use the managerial story, but this was without success. Later on managerial decisiveness was used to fire the board *without* elaborate research. In all of the cases the restricted use of the managerial story of governing was criticized, but its consequences were not undone. After the crisis in Free City the managerial story did not lose its credibility in the political setting, but became even more important. At the end of the cases the need to be decisive became important again.

The political story was used in the cases either to talk about undesirable behavior or to increase the scope of the sense making with alternative views. The story also became visible in the need to vote in the council at the end of three cases. In the Crisis the political story of governing played a dominant role from the beginning. The appraisal of the managerial story went hand in hand with the creation of a negative image of the political story. The conflict that was created was in part the rejection of conflict itself. Perhaps this act of pointing at the damage conflict would do was successful because in the three cases a crisis had taken place not too long ago.[5] In all of the cases the political story was used either to talk negatively about the way governing had taken place in the past or to paint a picture of politicians and citizens as actors who fought primarily for their own values and interests. The local authority, so it was said, had to defend *public* values and interests. Nevertheless, the critique of the managerial focus in the Center Planning and in the Core Tasks Debate later led to the proposal of political visions, and in the Urban Restructuring to comments from residents who expanded the scope of the problem.

Overall, more variety entered the sense-making process. Politics at this point – for a brief time, but not in the Crisis – was given a more positive connotation. Politics was pursued with public values other than economy, efficiency and effectiveness. Politics had to for a period do with debate and persuasion. In response to the variety that entered the sense making leading sense makers incorporated the variety in proposals and tried to reduce overt conflict. In the end, the political story was also used to end three processes with the help of voting and backstage pressure. The political story was thus enacted in the use of institutional powers to win battles. In both the Center Planning and the Crisis there were clearly winners and losers. Both camps seemed to consider the other perhaps more as an enemy than as an adversary. It was only in the Core Tasks Debate that public voting was almost made redundant, although the depoliticizing method was an indirect voting system. The three P's for the versions of political stories observed in these cases would be concepts like politicization, polarization and power (or power-play). Although persuasion (another possible P) in principle fits well to the political story of governing, in the cases there were only a few instances of it.

The consensus story was found primarily at the beginning of the processes and after polarization had taken place. The initial consensus on the perceived relevance of the problem and the commitment to - or at least support for - finding a solution seemed to have enabled the subsequent reports (Center Planning), method (Core Tasks Debate) and plan (Urban Restructuring) to leave their traces. The main sense makers made use of this established commitment and nurtured it throughout the sense-making processes. Consensus and commitment seemed to be necessary to some degree. The problems throughout the processes were, therefore, hardly connected to concrete parties and actors. The Crisis showed the importance of consensus and commitment. Here, the board acted without support from a big group of actors, thereby allowing their restricted views of the problem and solution to become a *fait accompli*. At the same time the consensus story represented an ideal that was invoked at various times. Actors often pointed to their willingness to support the collective, by working for the town or city and its inhabitants. This support occurred later on in the Center Planning, Core Tasks Debate and Crisis cases; it was in reaction to, and in anticipation of, the politicizing attempts of other actors. It was also used by the leading actors in the Crisis and, most of all by a political leader in the coalition, when they tried to offer a compromise. Compromise involved not only invoking different and opposing meanings of the issue at stake, but also different ways of governing. But these efforts did not succeed in uniting opposing camps, as the consensus story of governing prescribes. Overall in the cases, the version of the consensus story used was not the one in which citizens were actively invited to take part in the public sense making. Although concepts like 'societal support' and 'the opinion of the citizen' were promoted,, the image of politicians who are not afraid of making decisions for the common interest was stronger. In the end the three C's that were used to talk about this story (i.e., consultation, compromise and consensus) could be completed with a fourth: commitment.[6]

As it turns out the stories of governing were all in use in the cases, and none of them was absolutely dominant. Nevertheless, they had a different meaning in the phases of the interpretive process and 'in the hands' of different actors. A most obvious example was the primarily negative use of the political story and the restricted use of the consensus story. In addition, it became clear that stories of governing were built in contrast to one another. For instance, wanting to have a big debate about the role of the municipality in reaction to a hole in the municipal budget was argued to be less urgent than making cuts pragmatically. Being pragmatic was presented as going in a straight line to the finish. I return to these general observations below, when the work of stories is reviewed more broadly. Here, as in *Chapter 2 (*at the end of *Section 2.4)*, the question can be asked whether these three stories are all there is. In the analysis of empirical cases, the three stories of governing have been helpful, for looking at sense making on stage, but from behind the scenes – and in the Crisis from center stage - the outcry of another story was heard. This story, on which I briefly touched in *Chapter 2*, is one in which those who govern are insecure. The Crisis gave the best example of this. In this case we saw a 'kingdom' crumble in less than two weeks. As the members of the board and, more forcefully, a leader of a coalition party argued, sometimes it is impossible to govern. If the forces of politics and nature are upon you, it is hard not to become a fatalist. Who can have control at all times? Governing for a moment is impossible. It has *no* sense.

Although this kind of story does remind one of (post)modern cultural stories about an 'unknown' or network society that resists straightforward interpretations (van Gunsteren 1994; Hajer and Wagenaar 2003b), in the cases reviewed, this story of governing was not heard that much. Even if the meaning of what was going on was unclear, there were actors who stepped up to give a particular meaning to what was going on. The Center Planning helped to illustrate this. It is not too strange to expect that while the actors in the local authority in Heart-less Town were debating the location of a new center, many citizens developed their own distinctive ideas, learned to live with the present center, and lost interest in the topic as such. Perhaps they did not see the problem in the first place. If what is going on is too complex to deal with or if some actors have lost their interest, this does not prevent the dominant storytellers from constructing a story about, for example, a town that is fighting – even, split in two - over the location of a new center. Politicians and civil servants, in need of problems to solve, might forget that it is they themselves who keep the body in motion. The trauma of Heart-less Town was perhaps most of all the trauma of the local authority in Heart-less Town. Keeping the problem ambiguous for some time can be helpful, but only for as long as the belief in the problem, and the possibility of a solution, are maintained. In the cases it became apparent that asking the citizens what they wanted, and whether they wanted anything at all, was seen as a sign of weak performance. Politicians are supposed to have an opinion. Boards are supposed to both produce and realize visions. Civil servants and specialists are supposed to have plans and reports. In the cases, actors came up with urgent problems which they claimed they wanted to deal with together, or with the help of specialists. Perhaps analysis of failed projects could help to further understand the way stories of governing might also work when fatalism is given space, or when governments find out that they have produced something nobody wants.

Work that Stories Do

The sense making in the cases was in large part making sense of governing. Practice stories about a hole in a budget or bad board members instantly invoke stories of governing. In this way the meanings of governing became part of the sense making in a more intense way than expected. The struggle over the meaning of what happens involved a struggle between the stories of governing, and was observed from the beginning of the processes. The actors started to reflect more and more on their own sense making, if they had not done that from the start; the practice stories also acted to support certain ways of governing and looking at the municipality. Similarly, stories of governing supported practice stories. Together, the stories in the cases seemed to do different kinds of work. It is useful to repeat Forester's account of what stories do: '[…] the descriptive work of reportage, moral work of constructing character and reputation (of oneself and others), political work of identifying friends and foes, interests and needs, and most importantly […] deliberative work of considering means and ends, values and options, what is relevant and significant, what is possible and what matters, all together' (Forester 1993: 195). In my cases, the stories could be said to do the work of, or at least support, governing acts in one or more of the following ways:

Stories helped to construct

The realities of problems needed to be constructed. Understanding what is going on does not fall from the sky. This is the descriptive work of reportage that Forester talked about. Similarly, the realities of governing and the solutions to problems also had to be constructed. Take for instance the elementary, but necessary problem definition in the

Center Planning: 'Once upon a time there was a town without a heart…' Making up stories was creative work. The proposal of settings, events and entities made it possible for actors to see what was going on. Storytellers made use of clichés like the selfish politician or citizen. These elements were borrowed from stories of governing or from another cultural domain. But with the help of new story elements, stories also helped actors to see the world anew. The stories of governing themselves were reconstructions of governing. They were both ways of understanding acts of actors and of generating new acts on the basis of this understanding (compare Geertz 1993[1973]: 93).

Stories helped to unite

Most of all at the beginning of the cases, but also later on, stories worked to unite actors in the interpretive process. Although not part of Forester's definition, this social work is certainly part of his thinking about stories. The Core Tasks Debate offered a clear example of this work: '*We* are facing a large hole in the budget that *we* can only get rid of if *we* work together…' And whether there is really a hole in the budget of 1.8 million Euros is not that relevant. Like one of the informants said 'Se non è vero, è bien trovato' ('if it is not true it is still well made up'). The danger, then, was some force from outside. Some storytellers were more successful than others in their attempts to externalize the dangers that had to be faced. Commitment among the relevant audience in a municipality was necessary. Stories that were meant to unify were repeated over and over again without meeting relevant resistance.

The crucial feature of stories that do this work was ambiguity, that is, the multiplicity of meaning. The ambiguity of the stories, partly as a result of their open-endedness, and metaphors in them (like 'a centre as a heart') allowed for various ways to proceed, allowed for a variety of actors to agree upon the problem that was proposed. More complicated stories were also meant to unite, or at least loosely couple, various opposing practice stories and stories of governing, and through this the actors who sponsored them. In the cases, the reframing of opposing problem definitions proved to be a recurrent act, but uniting actors who were in a fight over a problem did not occur (see *Chapters 5* and *7*). Uniting stories that were not 'necessarily' opposed during the process allowed actors to find their own meaning in the sense that was made and the course of action that was proposed. The consensus story of governing is in line with this work.

Stories helped to contrast

As opposed to uniting, when a more explicit difference was made between right and wrong, stories worked to contrast. In this way they constructed two worlds at the same time. In the Center Planning a contrast was made between the past and the present/future: 'In the past emotion ruled and the planning failed, now we are going to be rational and we will succeed….' They were used to proposed normative leaps (Rein and Schön 1977), from a world that *is* (or *was*) and a world that *ought to be*. It is no mere detail that two sides were needed because they helped the audience believe that it was choosing the right way and not just blindly following. An enemy, an adversary - even if it was something very abstract - worked to legitimize certain actions. The oppositions created in the cases were, for instance, between emotion and reason, the past and the future. Here, Forester's moral work of constructing character and reputation and the political work of identifying friends and foes can be found. The way interpretations create contrasts between 'us' and 'them,' 'friend' and 'enemy' is central to (some of the work in) discourse theory (e.g. Mouffe 2005; Griggs and Howarth 2006).

Stories helped to delimit

During an interpretive process, stories worked to demarcate the boundaries of what was going on and to offer categories and names that directed the attention of the audience. They helped storytellers to delimit where their audience would look and what they would see. The obvious reason for this is that the larger the reality, the harder it becomes to create tangible effects in it. For instance, as opposed to building a new shopping center, creating a heart of town is ambitious as well as difficult for the actors to find out when or whether it succeeded. With a concrete story actors could focus on the clear ends and means that Forester included in his definition. Institutional structures, ad hoc or not, could be coupled to the stories, making their reality harder to deny. Many words were turned into numbers that told their own story (Stone 2002[1988]: 172-177). That did not, however, mean that sense making became automatic, or that solutions had little impact on the lives of those involved. Numbers still had to be sold to an audience, especially if they told a story that was not particularly welcome, such as in the Center Planning.

When reality was delimited, it offered the chance to know it, measure it, and manipulate it more easily. The managerial story of governing is in line with this work. It offers both the tools and vocabulary for it. But the selection of story elements is also always political. As Forester argues, stories help to direct attention to what matters. When a story directs attention to certain settings, events and entities, it helps actors find their problems and solutions *in* them. Take for instance the way the board members and their acts were highlighted in the Crisis: 'When the board members got into trouble, they tried to blame their ill colleague….' A consequence of directing attention is that other possible settings, events and entities were overlooked. What Stone (1989) called causal stories help to make statements about who or what is to blame for what is going on. Pointing at human actors as the source of problems or even of solutions was considered inappropriate in the cases. When it was done, it constructed a world of bad guys and good guys, enemies and friends, and the work that is done is building contrast.

Stories help to enlarge

While stories were used to direct attention to a certain more or less concrete reality, they were also used to divert attention, and expand meaning and in this way enlarge the relevant reality. As one of the actors in Center Planning argued: 'The decision we are preparing here is not one for the coming 30 years, but for the coming 100 years….' Here we see the move to more general concepts of Forester's definition: values and options, perhaps to be joined by visions and dreams. This happened when stories came into play in which bigger, other, or more settings, events and entities played a role. The variety of views increased. The variety of sense makers simultaneously increased. Enlarging reality involved offering alternatives and efforts to show a bigger picture. Politicians used stories in the cases to take the initiative from the specialists and fight the limitations the specialists were able to produce.

Seeing the variety of work stories do, some who have read – parts of - previous versions of this study said that it seems that there is nothing stories do not do. They referred to Wildavsky, who gave one of his articles the title: *if planning is everything, maybe it's nothing*. This comment can be applied to all more or less consistent approaches to social realities that start from a set of premises like 'actors make sense through storytelling.' If we use a narrative approach, we blind ourselves somewhat to what is non-narrative about the world. What should be taken into account is that it is not one- and-the-same story that does all the work described on the previous pages at the same time. Moreover, stories do not do their work all alone; they do not speak for themselves. They need to be told and interpreted in order to do some kind of work. The work stories do has effects on the ways actors treat the world. If a certain reality - like for instance a crisis (Burke 1989: 137, see also Chapter 7) - is perceived and accepted as the reality, actors start to act according to this reality (the Thomas theorem). If actors start to understand what happens in terms of a crisis, they will subsequently experience it as a roller-coaster ride - like one of the actors in the Crisis called it. If they are reading and hearing about it, they will come to see a public meeting in which the main cast of characters will perform. With all these people visiting the meeting, the tension builds. And all the attention to it will generate more attention. For some of those involved it starts to look like the moment of truth. Efforts to further direct attention to a small set of actors who can be found guilty or, inversely, to spread the guilt among more actors, will probably be used. And in the end, as we saw in the case, some of the stories and the work they were meant to perform succeeded, while other stories remained in vain. So, actors organize the world according to the stories they believe or want others to believe. Alternative realities are marginalized or hidden. In the Crisis the result was that few actors took the fall for what could easily be seen as a complex process in which right and wrong were hard to distinguish. Unmasking some of the alternative courses of action and hidden meanings, researchers can help actors in practice to be critical of what is going on in their town and municipality. But, drawing attention to what is hidden produces yet other hidden realities that can be uncovered.

To Conclude

In this chapter a comparison has been made across the four empirical cases in this research. Points of comparison have been the phases in the interpretive process, with an emphasis on the struggle over meaning, and the use of stories. The interpretive process turned out to be a process in which the meaning of issue is quite literally under construction. Although all interpretive processes have their unique characteristics, comparison shows that important similarities also exist. The analysis of the cases has finally led to a view of the work stories do in interpretive processes. Stories are used in various complementary *and* opposing ways. In the next and final chapter I give an answer to the main research question. That chapter also takes me back to the debate on governing culture, that I started with in the first chapter, and allows me to formulate some lessons for practice.

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[1] Although adding a new location is not an act that points towards no-nonsense policy, it does help to depoliticize the sense making for a while.

[2] The mayor tried to present himself as another category than the other members of the board, asking attention for the different relations between a council and a mayor. The ma-

jority in the council however treated him as a member of the board, making use of the juridical expertise of the secretary of the council.

[3] Conversation and observations after at later times showed that in the eyes of the citizens not a lot had improved.

[4] That is of course not an uncommon thing to argue about a crisis (Weick 1985). But even though extreme politicization and polarization might be unwanted and rare, two of the cases involved a move from political fights to political feuds (Edelman 1988: 66-68).

[5] And in the Center Planning a history of political fights was successfully painted.

[6] Duyvendak and Krouwel (2001) have used Cooperation as another C (leaving out consultation).

10 Culture as Storytelling

Now, however, there are Momentous New Developments, we are beginning to Get the Subject Organized, and the present essay is a Modest Contribution to that end. Hopefully, also, it will soon be superseded by Better Formulations, for All Signs Now Point to Rapid Progress.

Waldo (1961)

10.1 An Answer to the Question

Now, at the end of this study it is time to look back at what has been learned and tease out the implications for theory, research and practice. *Chapter 1* started with an interest in culture in Dutch municipalities. The interest for this topic in both research and practice has grown after disasters, political crises and a big change project in Dutch local government called dualization.[1] After a review of approaches to culture, the choice was made to further develop and use an approach that defines culture as the sense-making processes actors engage in. A quest began to find out how actors in municipalities give meaning. In *Chapter 2* the idea of an interpretive process was outlined. This is the process in which meaning making takes place. The concept of stories – practice stories and stories of governing - was also introduced. In addition, three stories of governing were outlined. *Chapter 3* provided a methodological account of how the research was done. In *Chapter 4* a short introduction to the Dutch municipality was found. In *Chapters 5*, *6*, *7* and *8* four case studies were presented. In the previous chapter the cases were compared. In this last chapter three things are accomplished. In this first section the answers, that the preceding chapters provided to the main question, are summarized. In *Section 10.2*, the findings are used to reflect on the debate on culture in Dutch municipalities and interpretive studies. Finally, in *Section 10.3* some recommendations are given to actors in practice.

In this last chapter, it is time to return to the main research question. This question was: **How do actors in Dutch municipalities make sense of issues they are confronted with, which images of governing do they use in their sense making, and how do they use these images?** The answer to this question contains both theoretically- and empirically-derived notions. To avoid too much repetition, the sections in which a certain part of the answer has been dealt with substantively are not repeated, but are referred to. It is important to keep in mind that the selection of the theory and the cases was made to study instances of sense making that involve a variety of actors in a municipality, and the issues that were deemed relevant by these actors.[2] When actors in municipalities are confronted with an issue, such as the lack of a proper town center or a hole in the municipal budget, they ask themselves two questions: *What is going on?*, and *What should we do?* (see *Section 2.1 and 2.2*). The first question is related to the meaning of the issue. The second question points to what is characteristic of practice: the need to act. Actors engage in an interpretive process in order to formulate answers to these questions. The interpretive process can be divided into three analytically separable phases. First of all, initial meanings of what is going on are proposed. This act is akin to problem setting. Subsequently, a struggle over meaning takes place. Finally, the meaning of an issue is established and acted upon or another issue draws attention to itself. The interpretive process was expected to be dynamic and was not expected to have a clear end, since the meanings of issues keep on changing. In addition, some meanings were expected to be hidden.

Zooming in on the interpretive process, sense making can be seen in more practical terms as storytelling (see *Section 2.3*). Stories consist of settings, events and entities. The setting of a story is the general background against which what is going on is supposed to be taking place. Time and space are two important dimensions of a setting. A setting can be, for instance, a neighborhood in the city during the year 2006. Events are what has actually happened or what is happening. For instance, three board members who publicly announce a loss of faith in their colleague. Events often concern human acts, but might also be seen in terms of developments. Finally, with entities a story involves human or non-human actors that do the acting, the means through which they act, and the actors (or objects) that are affected by the events. Examples of actors are a council member who gives a speech and a neighborhood resident who is arrested. Stories contain both descriptive and normative elements. They do not just depict a reality. They help to indicate what settings, events and actors matter, and how they should be valued. Stories attribute meanings to issues, enabling actors to decide what is going on and what should be done (more on what stories do can be found at the end of this section). Because they are part of the totality of communications between actors in the field, stories have to be reconstructed from the data that are collected during research (see *Chapter 3*, *Section 3.4*).

There are two relevant kinds of stories: *practice stories* and *stories of governing*. *Practice stories* are stories directed at the issue at hand. Although stories might give clear answers to the question 'what is going on?' and might direct the audience towards a clear action pattern, ambiguity can also play an important role. Moreover, as the cases clearly illustrated, the meaning of issues changes during an interpretive process. New practice stories are presented, earlier ones altered or combined. If actors ask themselves 'what should we do?,' they have to find out who 'we' are and what 'we' do. Actors in municipalities constantly make use – whether strategically or not - of basic images of who/what they are and do. This is what *stories of governing* are about. Making sense of an issue involves making sense of the sense maker(s) and the sense making. Practice stories and stories of governing overlap, and do so increasingly during the course of the interpretive process. This is because those who govern reflect on what they can do about the problem, and in this way become part of the unfolding stories. Moreover, issues themselves may involve stories about problematic governing in the first place. In a complex organizational environment such as a municipality, several of these stories of governing are in use. Three of those stories were identified for the Dutch municipalities in this study, but these stories are also applicable to other contexts. The identified stories of governing were: the consensus story, the political story and the managerial story.

A Consensus Story

Governing, according to the consensus story, means looking for consensus (see *Section 2.4*). This story could be expected to have been the most prominent, at least if Dutch municipalities reflect the characterizations of the national level. This is because it follows the description of Dutch governing culture as a culture of three C's: consultation, compromise and consensus. If actors encounter an issue that is commonly accepted as relevant, they will look for a practice story of it that corresponds to as many of the ways of looking as can be found among those who participate in the sense-making process. In this story the municipality is a *community*. Actors perceive other actors as colleagues. In the end the process towards consensus is more important than the content of the solutions. The sense-making process then becomes a slow-moving affair in which many actors are involved. This story does not, however, formulate a clear answer to the crucial question about which community is talked about. Is it just the elite of politicians, board members and higher civil servants, or does it include civil society and citizens? In the second version of the consensus story – in line with ideas about governance as a mode of steering that is more horizontal - what is called 'the local authority' is just one of the actors. The local authority is not seen as being in charge, although it could have the special role of safeguarding the process towards consensus. The citizen, as an equal of other governing actors, in this story can become an active co-producer of the meaning of issues.

In the cases the consensus story appeared primarily at the beginning of the processes and after polarization of the interpretive process had taken place (see *Section 9.7*). In the beginning, the establishment of consensus about a general problem area worked to create *commitment* (a fourth C). This seemed necessary throughout the process if actors wanted to gain support for a certain course of (collective) action. With the exception of the case in which consensus was absent (see *Chapter 7*), the problems were hardly connected to concrete parties and actors. In three of the cases the main actors tried to offer a compromise in reaction to, and in anticipation of, the politicizing attempts of other actors.

A Political Story

Governing according to the political story means fighting for, and against, political visions (see *Section 2.4*). If actors – as a political group - encounter an issue they find relevant, they will try to persuade other groups of their practice story, presenting the vision embedded in it as good and true.[3] In this story the municipality is a *battlefield*. Of importance in sense-making processes are the differences in the *content* of an issue. The availability of a variety in views is seen as a good thing because it offers actors in the municipality the opportunity to choose.[4] Actors perceive other actors as adversaries or allies. When political feuds and crises appear, adversaries might even turn into enemies that are part of opposing camps. Ideas about the relationship between societal stakeholders and the local authority can also be found in the political story. The political parties in the council represent opposing political groups in the town or city. These groups are seen as political subcultures that are at war through the local political parties. But, as a result of the way relationships in municipalities developed over time, the local authority forms its own subculture. The local authority might argue that if other actors in the town or city do not agree with the meaning that the local authority gives to an issue, it is the result of self-interest. The other actors do not safeguard public values and the public interest. Citizens are likely to be seen as voters or servants, although they also might become strategic allies.

In the cases, the political story was used either to talk about undesirable behavior, to increase the scope of the sense making and to vote at the end of three of the processes (see *Section 9.7*). In one case the political story of governing played a dominant role from the beginning. Even though political debate did occur, if one were to come up with three P's for the political story identified in the cases, they would include concepts like politicization, polarization and power(play) rather than persuasion.

A Managerial Story

Governing according to the managerial story means being goal-directed and making tangible products (see *Section 2.4*). If actors encounter an issue that is commonly accepted as relevant, they will research it, make decisions on the basis of facts, and implement these. This story combines the idea of a municipality as *an enterprise* that makes products and delivers services, with a cult(ure) of decisiveness. Not three C's, but three E's are of importance in this story: economy, effectiveness and efficiency. No-nonsense decisiveness makes for business-like pragmatism. In the interpretive process it is not that there is consensus about the content of what is going on, but rather that there is *control* over it. In this story it is not important what decisions are reached, as long as they *are* reached, and that their implementation is feasible. In addition to a focus on 'getting things done,' there is a clear *forensic* side to this story. Especially the objective principles of economy and calculation come into play as a means to depoliticize matters. Once found, the 'facts' will be asked to 'speak for themselves.' Citizens will get the role of clients of the municipal enterprise.

In three of the four cases there was a very clear presence of the managerial story of governing; most of all at the beginning of the processes (see *Section 9.7*). With its emphasis on the urgency of the issues, the managerial story of governing, more or less, successfully hid alternative and possibly conflicting views. In all of the cases the restricted use of the managerial story of governing was criticized and in three cases it lost its dominant position, but the consequences of its use were not undone. At the end of the cases the need to be decisive became important again. In *Table 10.1* the three stories of governing are presented.

Table 10.1: Three Stories of Governing

	Definition of governing	*Image of municipality*	*Key concepts*
Consensus	Searching consensus	Community	Consultation, compromise, consensus, commitment
Political	Fighting for/against political visions	Battlefield	Polarization, politicization, power-play
Managerial	Being goal-directed and making tangible products	Enterprise	Economy, effectiveness, efficiency, fact finding

Overview of the Process

After comparing the cases, it became clear that there was not just *one* interpretive process. There were both important similarities and differences across all the cases (see

Section 9.6 and Section 9.7). There were important similarities in the cases when it came to the use of the stories in them. The basic practice stories that the actors used at the beginning of the process were increasingly combined with other practice stories. This resulted in more complicated, hybrid stories. In addition, the sense making observed in the cases was, for a significant part, making sense of governing. In this way the meanings of governing became part of the sense making, in a more intense way than expected. The struggle over the meaning of what happened always involved a struggle between stories of governing. The practice stories supported certain ways of governing and looking at the municipality, and visa versa.

A striking similarity could be found in the development of interpretive processes: there was a consensual starting point where a general problem was agreed upon, followed by the dominance of a managerial story of governing at the beginning, and, finally, a rise in conflict and - in three of the cases - an increase in the scope of meaning. Another similarity in all the cases is that the citizens and civil society were most of all kept out of the sense making. Finally, it should be pointed out that the two cases in one municipality had another striking similarity in the way the board of mayor and aldermen tried to unite various practice stories and stories of governing in their proposals.

Furthermore, the analysis has shown that all of the stories of governing were in use in the cases, and none of them was absolutely dominant (see *Section 9.7*). Nevertheless, they had a different meaning in the phases of the interpretive process and were used differently by the various actors. In addition, it became clear that stories of governing are built in contrast to one another. In analyzing the three stories of governing in the empirical cases could also be heard at times. This story is one in which those who govern are insecure.

The Work of Stories

Together, stories in the cases seemed to perform various kinds of work in the cases (see *Section 9.7*). First of all, stories helped to construct the realities of problems. The proposal of settings, events and entities enabled actors to see what was going on. With the help of clichés and new story elements, actors saw the world in both familiar and new ways. Secondly, stories helped to unite against some danger that threatened the town or city and the actors in it. The crucial feature of stories that do this work was ambiguity. Since stories were ambiguous, they allowed for a variety of actors to agree on the proposed problem. More complicated stories were also meant to unite or at least couple various opposing practice stories with stories of governing. In these acts of reframing (Schön 1994[1979]; Schön and Rein 1994), stories were also used to unite the actors who sponsored the different stories. Uniting actors proved to be very difficult in polarized contexts. Thirdly, stories helped to contrast. This occurred when explicit differences between right and wrong were identified. In this way they constructed two worlds at the same time: One that was desirable and one that was unwanted. Stories were used to propose normative leaps from the unwanted that *is* (or *was*), to the desirable that *ought to be*. Fourth, stories helped to delimit. During the interpretive process stories worked to demarcate the boundaries of what was going on and offer categories and names that directed the attention of the audience. They helped storytellers to delimit where their audience looked and what they saw. When reality is delimited, it makes it possible to know it, measure it and manipulate it more easily. Fifth and finally, stories helped to enlarge. While stories might be used to direct attention to a certain more or less concrete reality, they can also be used to divert attention and enlarge the relevant reality. This happened when stories came into play in which bigger, other or more settings, events and entities played a role. The variety of views increased. As the cases illustrated, the work stories do has effects on the way actors treat the town and all that it involves. New town centers and neighborhoods are built, budgets are cut, employees are laid off and political adventures are ended. That could all have been different. As social constructivists know, if a certain reality is perceived and accepted as the reality, actors start to act on the basis of it and alternative views of reality are marginalized or hidden.

10.2 Back to the Culture Debate

According to a standard view, a culture is a complex set of shared beliefs, values, and concepts which enables a group to make sense of its life and which provides it with directions for how to live. This set might be called basic belief system… [But] any culture complex enough to warrant the name will consist of conflicting beliefs and rules that offer mixed, contested and ambiguous beliefs to its followers.

Fay (1996: 55, 57)

Governing Culture Revisited

A large part of the first chapter of this study was dedicated to the debate on culture in the study of government. A particular approach was chosen and further developed to look at culture in municipalities. Culture, so it was argued, could better be seen as a process than a force. In addition, culture could better be approached interpretively than as a measurable variable. My approach also could be called a cultural or interpretive approach (compare Yanow 1996; 2000; Bevir and Rhodes 2003). The choices that were made in order to study culture – to look at culture as a process in which ambiguity and diversity can play a big role, to study concrete action interpretively with the help of ethnographic fieldwork - might make some argue that I have not studied culture at all. They might argue that culture is shared and stable *by definition* (e.g. Schein 1991). They might argue that ethnography and thick descriptions only end up with incomparable results (compare King, et al. 1994). However, this is not the case. Throughout the preceding chapters the possibility and usefulness of looking differently at culture was not just presumed, it was shown.

In *Chapter 1* a puzzle emerged around the governing culture of the Netherlands and Dutch municipalities. On the one hand, the governing culture of the Netherlands was expected to be one of three C's: consultation, compromise and consensus (Hendriks and Toonen 2001). On the other hand, the introduction of alternative strands in the governing culture were noticed, namely a politicizing culture and a cult(ure) of decisiveness (Daalder 1995). Working with the main research question (see *Section 10.1*) offered me a chance to find out whether the literature or the cases disproved the idea of three C's when it came to Dutch municipalities. Combining the results from my case study analyses with the various ideas about sense making and images of Dutch municipalities, I was able to describe three stories of governing (*Chapter 2*). One of them, the consensus story, was in line with the idea of the three C's. The political story and the managerial story were partly in conflict with the consensus story, and also with each other.

In the four cases and their analysis, the use of these images of governing was investigated. It is, at least on the basis of the four cases, impossible to say whether the three C's reflected a dominant way of governing, or if it is a Dutch tradition that is disappearing. What can be said, however, is that it is doubtful whether it *could* be a 'stand-alone' culture. Not only were the different stories of governing found in all four processes, the actors in the cases also promoted the stories of governing in contrast to each other. That is to say, at certain points, one way of thinking and doing was promoted as superior to another one that had been used or might be used. In general governing culture in the cases was a dynamic interplay between different ways of looking at, and doing, governing. These different ways are used to construct, replace *and* support each other.

The genuine wish to come to consensus might lack, even if or when, for instance, board members do their best to unite stories and actors. Rather, it can be the commitment to a certain issue that fuels the interpretive process. It is then not a clear, shared image of an issue that glues the actors and their views together, as much as the ambiguity of the problem definition. The compromise that actors reach is not so much one of giving and taking, as much as finding a level of abstraction on which differences between views do not stand out. Nevertheless, consensus seemed to be an ideal, even if the cases did not show instances in which *opposing* groups were united in the end. A similar observation can be made about the image of a local community that is involved in governing. What could be seen is the anxiety or the problematic relationship that the main storytellers in local government have with the opinions of the citizens, or perhaps better called the voice of the public (Tops 2001). This observation can also be applied to the empirical claim of a shift from government to governance, seen as a move from hierarchical to more horizontal steering (compare John 2001: 1-24). It is more plausible that, in municipalities like the ones under study, new forms of governing are added to older forms than actually replacing them. Especially the hierarchical relationship between the local authority and citizens does not seem to have altered substantively. Despite all the talk about working together with the citizens (Commissie Toekomst Lokaal Bestuur 2006; VNG 2006b) Dutch boards and councils, such as those presented in the cases, could still be expected to claim that they are the authority who decides on the meaning of what is going on. It is no wonder that to outsiders the culture is called 'closed'.

The managerial story was quite a dominant story in the cases. Perhaps some would argue that the pragmatism in this story was part of the governing culture, as Lijphart (1975[1968]) had described it and that this is part of the culture of three C's. However, there is a difference between aiming at making a decision in order to go on – pragmatism - and making decisions that have support among as many actors as possible - consensus. Even if it were presented as a way of governing that enabled reaching consensual agreement in times of conflict, it mostly involved *dealing with* variety and not *representing* it. Hidden behind its methods and no-nonsense air, the managerial story more than the other stories could restrict sense making to an act in which only a few (i.e., experts and powerful decision makers) have a real say. Actors using the managerial story proved to be very successful in framing the problems at hand. Although the use of managerialism has already been pointed at in the literature on Dutch municipalities (Hendriks and Tops 1999), its importance in problem setting was not expected.

Finally, the political story seemed to be the least in use among the actors in the cases. But that did not mean that it did not help to shape thinking and action. On the contrary, actors expected other actors to fight for their group interests. The two local authorities under study at times acted like authorities who did not have to listen to citizens, because they were the ones who knew or decided what the public interest was. At the same time the idea that politicization and polarization might lead to feuds seemed to serve as a constant threat.[5] This is in line with what Lijphart (1975[1968]) said about governing in the period before 1968. Governing was directed at consensus in a society that was made up of divides. However, in these cases, the image of conflict 'out there' - in town or in politics - was not a clear and obvious reality as much as one that constantly had to be constructed to do its work.

Now, someone might still argue that in a municipality this or that way of thinking and doing is dominant. In their sketch of the governing culture in Dutch municipalities, Bovens et al. (2006a), for example, concluded with the statement that municipalities all have their unique governing culture. According to them municipalities have particular traditions that are developed over time. These are the cultural 'genes' of the city, the community. They are the strongly rooted ways of governing and governing relationships. There are two major objections to this view. First, both similarities *and* differences can be found in specific interpretive processes in one municipality. This finding does not support the idea that all parts of a municipality share one coherent set of traditions. Second, as actors construct a big part of their realities through making differences, the ways of doing and thinking vary over time within a municipality or interpretive process. This does not seem to support the idea of stable traditions either. Actors manage their own culture all of the time, arguing that 'now, we have to do things differently.' The cases provide various examples of this. Although Bovens et al. use a social constructivist approach to culture and are sensitive to the idea of a changing culture and the strategic use of images, their approach still seems grounded in the idea of municipalities imprisoned by their own governing culture. If we consider the instability of stories (compare Hajer and Laws 2006) that actors use, we come to a more subtle view. As became visible in the analysis of the cases, the meaning of issues and the elements of municipal life that are part of the stories about issues, emerge during the interpretive process. Attempting to think beyond my own cases, I have a much harder time locating culture in any particular place, be it a municipality, a town or city, or some other entity. There might be ways of thinking and doing that can be specific to a certain period, a certain subdivision or department, a certain province, and so on. This occurs with people entering and leaving towns, cities and local authorities all the time, with actors borrowing their views from politicians at the national, European or even the global level, and with newspapers and professional magazines.[6]

Looking at culture as a process and not as a mysterious force in the form of a shared tradition is consistent with the dynamic world of municipalities. It expands upon a more rigid idea of culture by focusing on the ways in which actors construct the realities they act upon. In a municipality plans, reports, visions and goals are all of the time discussed by members of different groups that give a distinctive meaning to the issues they encounter. Boundaries around groups fluctuate and new boundaries might be created in the course of an interpretive process. The ethnographic collection of data allows us to look at sense making on a daily or weekly basis, revealing dynamic interpretive processes that contrast with the idea of cultural stability surrounding issues or organizations over longer periods (e.g., Hendriks 1996). If cultural stability could be found in municipalities over longer periods it would coincide with significant dynamics on the ground.

On Studying Interpretively

Interpretive approaches allow readers to see the world of public administration differently (Rhodes 2007: 1257). In the study of public administration and policy making they can make a contribution when they focuses carefully on practitioners in action (Hajer and Laws 2006: 264). 'Interpretive approaches' however is not a name for a group of rigid research techniques (see Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006b). The approach used in this study to look at micro-processes might perfectly well be used to look at how different interpretive processes in municipalities influence each other. In such a study the idea of stories of governing might be used to examine how the internal structure of local government (between different policy fields like the social and the spatial) helps to construct certain meanings and how efforts to come to integral governing leads to new or other meanings. Next to this an investigation of the way in which the political story could make a different contribution to sense making in Dutch municipalities than it did in most of the cases would have an important added value (see fourth recommendation in *Section 10.4*). This investigation might be directed at the conditions under which variety and disagreement enrich sense-making processes (see also van Gunsteren 2006).

Ethnography of processes 'in the making' as a way to gather data is very suitable for such investigations because it enables researchers to see very well the effort that goes into the construction of meaning.[7] Others will choose to study culture as it manifests itself over a long time (Veenswijk 1995; Bovens, et al. 2006; Hendriks 2006). Their results will perhaps mostly resonate the *rhetorical* frames (Schön and Rein 1994: 32) actors use publicly and in interviews, whereas the research I advocate will stay closer to the messiness of 'the action.'[8] The advantage of being in the field, 'being there' (…and back again), is that there are many aspects of life in municipalities that the researcher can draw on to understand the sense making that is going on. In comparison to other ways of working, such as doing surveys, structured interviews or even a combination of interviews and document gathering (e.g., Cachet, et al. 2002; e.g., Denters and Pröpper 2002), the typical advantage of a prolonged stay proved to be the ability to 'sneak' into informal meetings, give accounts on different kinds of occasions and watch actors interact.

These ways of generating data enrich the understanding of what actors in the field 'are up to.' Hearing (variations of) the same story over and over again for example (without a researcher clearly triggering it like in an interview) can make one understand what is important to actors in a way that couldn't be understood without being there. In this way stories or story elements can be recognized as the clichés that give strength to certain ways of looking at problems. Although approaches focusing on larger time frames might encounter similar phenomena (e.g. Hajer 1995: 130), the use of observation and frequent conversation can help to uncover the clichés of daily conversation that might hardly occur in documents or formal interviews. In addition, feeling the 'physical' tension on an important night can make one understand how the attention of municipal actors is focused and how things get done.

If ethnographic case studies provide the opportunity to get close to life in municipalities, stories provide a way to preserve life in its details and particular quality. By reconstructing stories we can both catch concrete action and the way actors try to interpret their own acts. Stories have to be *re*constructed from practice (cf. Schön and Rein 1994). All kinds of accounts contribute to this reconstruction. Stories that actors use at the beginning of the process were increasingly combined with other stories, thereby resulting in more complicated, hybrid stories. These hybrid constructs were the result of the re-use of stories that have been around for a while *and* of interpretations of new developments and opportunities in the processes. In the Center Case (*Chapter 5*), for instance, the actors themselves slowly 'unpacked' their own (his)story about a town without a proper center. That did not mean, however, that actors were stuck in their history, as the development of the process showed. History and the new developments were both used creatively to envision a new center. In a municipality various stories about issues and various stories of governing – and images of the municipality – are constantly in use. Although it is not clear whether actors in practice are very aware of the need to combine different ways of seeing what is going on and what should be done (Schön and Rein 1994: 173-174), in these cases combining stories was shown as not simply adding one story onto another. It is not a simple copy-paste affair, as the unsuccessful efforts to reframe showed. Together, ethnography and the analysis of stories reveal diversity, dynamics and the uses of ambiguity in sense making, instead of reifying culture.

Does this mean that all studies should ethnographically follow the action and focus on stories? No. Studies at various levels of abstraction and the various approaches that fuel them can be valuable companions in a debate on governing culture. But, doing the work some other researchers have done could also have been done with a more interpretive approach: trying to uncover stories of governing in municipalities as traditions that have a long historical background. Instead of depending only on the present-day representations given in interviews, researchers could try to retrace stories in the first instance through a discourse analysis of documents that were written in the period under study. But then again, just like ethnography in present-day local government, it would take years to study what is still just a moment in the lives of actors in a complex and dynamic practice.

10.3 Dear Practitioners

Mixing seemingly opposing models is, however, not easy. Cultural bias and varying patterns of understanding inhibit such a mix. Many believe that reflective policy making and effective managerialism are at odds with one another. Others argue that serving the market and serving the public domain are two different things. Dealing with such tensions is one of the most difficult challenges of local administrators. It requires them to become the "masters of ambiguity", conciliators of apparent contradictions.

Hendriks and Tops (1999: 150)

In the end the question that forces itself upon us is *So What?* If sense making is a dynamic process during which actors simultaneously give meaning to issues and governing, what does that finding itself mean to the context in which it was found? How does this study contribute to what actors working for the national and provincial governments can do, and to what actors in municipalities can do? In general, various kinds of answers to this question are possible. For those who have read at least some of the preceding pages, it should come as no surprise that this work does not end with a straightforward list of instrumental recommendations. This study, in general, can help to create awareness to processes of sense making, and especially to the creative side of them. In addition, this last section offers five recommendations that can help to look differently at what should be done in municipalities. The first recommendation is meant mostly for those who are interested in the idea of culture in municipalities. The second recommendation is for people engaged in processes in and around municipalities. The third recommendation is intended for those who are thinking about the future of municipalities. The fourth recommendation is for those who work in local government and for policy makers at the national level who could help to improve local politics. The final recommendation is meant to serve all those who are already involved in municipalities, but want to become more aware of how sense making takes place, and for those who want to become more involved with municipalities, but do not know where to start.

Don't Pin the Pudding

Governing culture in municipalities is considered an important phenomenon (Begeleidingscommissie 2006b; Bovens, et al. 2006). The commission in charge of the implementation of *dualization* made a strong statement about this when it argued that more attention should be given to governing culture. They argued that governing culture only seems to get attention when things go wrong (e.g. Cachet, et al. 2001; Begeleidingscommissie 2006b: 13). But to be able to improve culture, it is very important to know what culture contains. 'Culture,' an anthropology professor said in a lecture I once sat in on, 'is like a pudding. If you try to pin it to the wall, it will fall on the ground.' What that means for culture in municipalities is that an attempt to determine the essence of a culture once and for all – to pin it to the wall - is a foolhardy act. Any attempt to change *the* culture of local government in a certain preconceived direction through central regulation is very ambitious. Why? Because regulations will always be interpreted locally (Yanow 1996). This is also what Bovens et al. (2006a) concluded when they evaluated the Dualization Act. Every municipality has its own way of looking at governing as a result of its history and circumstances (compare Cachet, et al. 2002). The Dualization Act therefore also obtained its interpretation according to the ruling traditions and practices (Bovens, et al. 2006: 107). What Bovens et al. (2006a: 25-27) seemed to be aware of as well is that *the* culture of a municipality itself is a hybrid and dynamic construct, interpreted locally and changing over time.[9] They nevertheless neglected to work out the consequences of this view. That can be done here on the basis the findings in this study.

First, actors might be acting *in response to an image* of their culture (seen as traditions) as much as on the basis of their culture. Although actors might not be constantly aware of the way they act nor what the basis of it is, they are surely capable of using the stories about what has happened in the past, and what should happen to their advantage. As we saw in the cases, the result of this is that the meanings of what is going on are created in a situation that is, to some extent, new. Old and new meanings are subsequently contested and altered. The same goes for the meanings of governing. Meanings, to an important degree, emerge during the process.

Second, there are many diversities, conflicts and ambiguities derived from the tensions in society, its organization, and the possibility of multiple realities. It is not likely that these diversities, conflicts and ambiguities will suddenly evaporate, nor would that be something desirable (see fourth recommendation). In municipalities actions are not founded on one set of clear and reinforcing meanings. Actors in municipalities have every right to claim the uniqueness of their town, city or local authority. But individuals and groups in a town, city or local authority should also have the right to claim their own images of those entities. To argue then that the actors who are involved in the act of governing in a municipality share their own unique culture draws attention away from the problematic nature of culture in municipalities. What I want to recommend here is that the attention to culture in municipalities should be based on a view of culture that takes into account the everyday tasks with which actors are confronted. Culture can be seen as an *ongoing* sense-making process. Learning about a culture, as a sense-making process of its own, then, might have the same attributes. In this view culture encompasses common organizational and political themes and tensions, such as the need for compromises and the ideal of consensus, the threat of conflicts and the beauty of variety, the limits of facts and the wish to move on. Practitioners in municipalities should look at the culture of their municipality as an encounter between grand ideas (how things should be) and their everyday affairs (how things are). Concretely this means that knowing and improving one's culture in a municipality might be best seen as something that actors in municipalities should work on constantly and reflectively. This task is certainly one that members on boards of mayors and aldermen, and politicians and civil servants in management positions should take up, and they should always do so with the help of members of civil society, party members, civil servants and citizens. Actors involved in policy making at national and provincial levels should also take this message seriously. For them the consequence is that targeting a clear end-goal, like in the dualization project, when it comes to culture is unrealistic and might even be undemocratic if it leads to ignoring or marginalizing alternative views.

Be Aware of Magic (1)

It is no secret that words matter in politics and organizations (Edelman 1964: 114-129; Weick 1995: 183-184). Some would boldly state that 'political language *is* political reality' (Edelman 1988: 104, italics in original). Through their words actors give shape to their world, or at least indirectly through the perceptions of it. Throughout this study I have illustrated how problems and solutions are shaped through language. I have also shown that the world of municipalities can be filled with tensions. In reaction to or in anticipation of these tensions, especially when demands and expectations increase, actors might reach for new images that encompass more and solve the tensions that arise. This took place in various cases. New names were invented. Metaphors proved helpful. An obvious example in the cases was 'an organic link' that had to unite two locations that could be used to build a new center and two opposing groups. The promise that is made on such occasions is the promise that a perfect solution is possible.[10] It is nothing more, nothing less than the promise of magic. The idea of *reframing*, Schön and Rein's gift to policy analysis (Schön 1994[1979]; Schön and Rein 1994),,carried a similar promise. If we find the underlying frames actors have, or so the authors claim, we might join them (the frames) and go beyond the stalemates and conflicts in practice. However, the major tool in use is the ambiguity of language in general and metaphors more specifically. What is expected of actors in practice is that they are 'masters of ambiguity,' as Hendriks and Tops (1999: 150) put it. This is something Schön and Rein (van Hulst 2008, forthcoming) did not pay enough attention to.

On the basis of the cases in this study it could be said that uniting stories about issues and about governing that are opposed is possible. Nevertheless, the success of such an overarching story should not just be looked at for the way it *intellectually* connects ways of seeing (compare Miller 1985), meaning the way in which it creates a new story on the basis of two opposing stories. It could better be found in the way the relevant audiences (i.e., politicians, board members, members of civil society, civil servants, citizens) interpret the story and value those who present and support it. It can be looked at for what it is able to include; it could also be valued on the basis of what it had to marginalize or hide, out of necessity. All and all, present day leading practitioners depend more and more on the success of their public performance, while at the same time these performances have to satisfy an increasing variety in audiences (Alexander 2004b; Hajer and Uitermark 2008).[11] Successful stories in the cases were not the compilation of all opposing stories into one overarching one. They involved representations of reality that were undeniable or at least plausible to the audiences involved. The recommendation for audiences in practice is, be aware of the promise of magic that is hidden in stories that claim to have solved all of the problems. (Hart 1993)

Be Aware of Magic (2)

The previous recommendation does not have to be limited to single interpretive processes. It can be applied to the level of culture in municipalities. In this way it can be applied to the debate on Dutch municipalities. Not too long ago a report on the future of the Dutch municipality appeared (Commissie Toekomst Lokaal Bestuur 2006). This report was accompanied by a pamphlet from the Association of Dutch Municipalities (VNG 2006b), which primarily validated the lessons in the report and turned them into a list of demands directed at national government. The commission's ideas were clearly colored by a different outlook on governing, as it has been put forward in terms of governance (Fenger and Bekkers 2007). In the report the Commission for the Future of Local Government introduced a new term to talk about the way governing should take place in the future municipality. Governing should become 'binding' (Commissie Toekomst Lokaal Bestuur 2006: 36-41; compare VNG 2006b). Now what does the commission mean with the concept of 'binding'? The Dutch word 'bindend,' like the English, has more than one connotation. The most obvious connotation is that of 'connecting.' In the English language to bind means 'to unite people, organizations, etc. so that they live together more happily or effectively: '*Organizations such as schools, factories and clubs bind a community together*' (Wehmeier and Ashby 2000). A similar definition can be found in Dutch: 'to create a band or a connection'[12] (van Dale, et al. 1995). This resonates with sound of the consensus story of governing as I have outlined it in this study.[13] But at the same time, 'to bind' has the connotation of 'committing.' To use the English dictionary once again, to bind means 'to force somebody to do something by making them promise to do it or by making it their duty to do it' (Wehmeier and Ashby 2000). The Dutch definition is even more straightforward: 'To restrict someone's freedom, to cramp' (van Dale, et al. 1995).[14] This second connotation can be applied to the idea of authority and the decisiveness that could be found in both the political and managerial stories of governing. With these two definitions in mind we can look at the use of the idea of 'governing as binding' in the report.

The commission defined *governing as binding* in the following way: 'a form of local government, in which administrators, from *a clear vision* of *the results to be obtained*, are capable of *connecting with citizens and societal organizations'* (Commissie Toekomst Lokaal Bestuur 2006: 36-37, italics added).[15] If this definition is read closely, both connotations of 'binding' can be found in it. On the one hand, connections should be made, but on the other hand the administrators tie themselves - and others - to clear goals. The three stories of governing used in this study reappear in this single definition. 'Connecting with citizens and societal organizations' is central in the consensus story of governing. The version of the consensus story of governing that the commission clearly promoted throughout the report is one in which citizens are central. 'A clear vision' is what a political story calls for. 'Obtaining results' is central to the managerial story of governing. Taken together the proposal pointed to various ways of looking at the municipality and, at the same time, various ways of acting in it. The commission argued that governing as binding is supposed to replace the concept of leadership. In the commission's view that concept is worn out and often leads to confusion. They also questioned whether it corresponded to the Dutch culture (Commissie Toekomst Lokaal Bestuur 2006: 36). Even though 'governing as binding' is fresh and might fit better in 'the' Dutch culture, the idea was bound to create its own confusion. The idea of governing as binding was used to reframe – or should we say unite – what in practice are often opposing stories of governing. If making sense of what happens in a town or a city is a dynamic process in which a(n increasing) variety of actors play a role, then it would be hard to start from a clear vision and aim for certain results. The meaning of problems will change over time, as will the solutions. What the commission called for, in other words, is an act of magic. It is not my argument that visions of a good municipality are not necessary, healthy or good. New concepts, metaphors and stories make us see more and different things. They help to construct problems and solutions. But, the idea of governing as binding only solves the problems of governing by connecting different ways of governing on an abstract level. It does not bring out the tensions between ways of governing. Irrespective of which side of the town hall wall you are on, it would not be wise or fair to expect or demand magic.[16]

Allow for Variety and Disagreement

The previous recommendations point at the danger inherent in the consensus story of governing. Wanting to satisfy everybody might lead to abstract stories that ignore differences. Whereas other critiques of the quest for consensus (Hendriks 2001; Hendriks and Toonen 2001) have pointed to the slowness of the quest, this study has shown the way in which a consensus could be aimed at by uniting stories that are opposing. The result is that variety and conflict are, to a certain extent, hidden. To actors in practice, the alternative, using a political story, does not appear appealing either. Therefore, an important question regarding the political story of governing in the Dutch context is what its positive contribution could be and why these are hardly found in cases like the ones under study.

Although one would not recommend that practitioners try getting into conflicts - like the crisis in *Chapter 7* - more often, it seems that the skills needed to value and use contrasts are not that well developed. Even if most Dutch practitioners might be more focused on reaching consensus than on fighting for their particular vision, it would not be of much help if they ignored the inherent need of some form of conflict in a society (Mouffe 2005; Griggs and Howarth 2006).[17] If 'governing capacity' (*bestuurskracht*)[18] and a revitalization of local democracy (Staatscommissie Dualisme en lokale democratie 2000) are desired, it might be attainable only if there is sufficient room to disagree and if differences in society are actually disclosed during public debate. As long as adversaries do not turn into enemies, more variety and overt disagreement might, in the end, enhance the quality of decisions (compare Abma 2001; compare van Gunsteren 2006). This recommendation also means that some politicians should stop assuming the legitimacy of the stories they have constructed on their own. The political story would in the first place be one of *persuasion* and not of *power-play*. Citizens and members of civil society should be actively involved, but not only if they are willing to support the plans that are popular inside the town hall. Boards of mayors and aldermen should welcome alternative proposals and make sure that efforts to unite proposals involve efforts to unite actors (see also the second recommendation). It is up to practitioners in municipalities to allow this to happen. The need for a policy directed at variety *between* municipalities has been recently argued for (Begeleidingscommissie 2006b: 12; Commissie Toekomst Lokaal Bestuur 2006), but policy makers at the national level should also try to think about and help establish conditions under which 'cultural' variety and disagreement *within* municipalities can be safeguarded.

Pay Attention to Stories

The use(fulness) of storytelling in practice has been shown throughout this study. Through the telling of stories actors make sense of what is happening and what should be done. 'Pay attention to these stories' is the last and most practical recommendation. What actors would establish if they engaged in storytelling is a *storytelling municipality* (compare Boje 1991). In a storytelling municipality actors would carefully listen to the stories that are told to them. They would ask themselves a general but relevant question: What story is being told here? If actors themselves tell stories in response they would try to practice what Schön and Rein (1994: 207) called ‘a double vision.’ In the context of storytelling, this means being able to tell and enact one story, while *at the same time* trying to understand and respect alternative stories. This does not have to lead to a constant quest for consensus on issues at all. It does involve accepting the need to take stories seriously. They should do this in order to safeguard and use the variety of ideas that actors together are able to come up with, and to critically assess and thereby improve one’s own stories.[19]

If one is engaged in concrete processes, more specific questions become important. Actors can start by asking themselves, ‘What story elements are being used to describe what is going on?’ When they tell stories, actors select *certain* settings, point at *certain* events and include *certain* actors. A subsequent question that actors can ask themselves is, ‘How do the stories help to construct, unite, contrast, delimit or enlarge definitions of the problems we are facing?’ Reconstructing their own and those that others tell, actors might, for instance, find out that what separates opposing stories cannot be united in the ways proposed. It could give them new views of what is going on. Insight into the differences and similarities in the elements of the stories will enable actors to understand new stories that better represent the problems that other actors are experiencing. The problem that is being constructed in town hall might turn out *not* to be the problem that is damaging to the people involved (Edelman 1988). As a consequence, acting from a sense of urgency might not be as effective and powerful as it seems at first. It might be better to go against the flow and openly doubt the dominant and unquestioned stories that circulate in town hall. Making sure that citizens and actors from civil society come into the town hall to tell their stories might be part of a policy that would bring out more views of the problems.

Once votes have taken place and contracts have been signed, it might be hard to stop the process from going in a particular direction. Stories are not only used for problem setting, they are also, and often simultaneously, connected to more or less clear solutions. Therefore, the next question is, ‘How do the stories point towards possible solutions, while marginalizing or hiding others?’ Solutions are not given with the problems, although stories frame problems in a certain way and make some solutions easier to see than others. Actors can go back and forth between initial stories and combinations of stories that were fabricated at a later time. They can switch between earlier and later stories to find out what solutions were being constructed and what might be forgotten.

Finally, the relationships between problems, solutions and the municipality should be interrogated. There are various images of governing and of municipalities. Using one of them or a combination has its consequences for what problems and solutions are envisioned. Actors might ask themselves, ‘What image of governing and the municipality do these stories use, and what images are marginalized or hidden?’ When actors think about this final question, they think about the way municipalities come into being while policies are made.

All of these questions might seem simple, but they are of crucial importance for sense making in municipalities. Engaging them requires actors to become involved in the construction of stories themselves. It asks them to become active, to interact with other actors and to react to stories that others tell. Perhaps actors in a storytelling municipality will come to agree with me that there is no end to the Town Hall Tales.

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[1] The biggest change project even in Dutch local government, aimed to revitalize local democracy and politics (see *Section 4.2*).
[2] One of the consequences was that matters of implementation got less attention.
[3] On the one hand, this story was based on the idea of a politicized culture that was dominant at the beginning of the 1970s in the Netherlands (Daalder 1995) and has since become part of the practice (Kickert 2003: 123). On the other hand, this story draws on the view of a municipality as a political *and* an authoritarian organization (compare Ringeling 1998; Ringeling 2004).
[4] It should be clear perhaps that the political battles are not necessarily restricted to the formal political institution – i.e., the municipal council.
[5] This might have to do with the crises that took place in the municipalities under investigation.
[6] And in the end researchers themselves introduce shorthanded concepts like traditions, styles, stories, etc. that serve as heuristic tools but at the same time generate the culture under investigation (cf. Clifford and Marcus 1986; Yanow 1995).
[7] This way of working does, of course, have well-known downsides: the danger of 'going native,' either in the form of losing yourself in the field or in the form of taking sides (in writing) is always close and the amount of time spent in the field.
[8] This is not to say that rhetorical frames are not messy, just that also looking at the action helps to add new interpretations.
[9] Nevertheless, they did not elaborate on this. Moreover, at the end of the report it seems that culture has become an entity of its own.
[10] The promise to *have it all* reminds one of the report in the case of the Core Tasks Debate (*Chapter 6*), in which the board reframed the process that had been going on with a proposal. 'Choosing and Connecting' the proposal was called. In the process the board claimed that visions were chosen and that separate visions and all sorts of actors were connected. What had happened, however, was that the visions were brought in after decisions had been made with the help of a decision-making tool. The council had been committed to a managerial way of governing, robbing itself of the opportunity to protest. Moreover, the connection with the citizens and civil society had been most of all a wish, and not the experience of the actors from outside the town hall who raised their voice near the end of the interpretive process.
[11] 'The more complex the society, however, the more often social performances fail to come together in convincing, seemingly authentic ways. The more that institutional and cultural resources become differentiated from one another –the more political and ideological pluralism allows conflict- the more common performance failure becomes (Alexander 2004b: 92)'.
[12] In Dutch: 'Een band of verbinding tot stand brengen.'
[13] Governing the Dutch way was already framed with a term that has the similar connotation: viscous (Hendriks 2001).
[14] In Dutch: 'In zijn vrijheid beperken, belemmeren.'

[15] In Dutch: 'een vorm van inrichting van het gemeentelijk bestuur, waarbij bestuurders vanuit een duidelijke visie op te bereiken resultaten, verbinding weten te maken met burgers en maatschappelijke organisaties'.

[16] This does not mean that consensus is something bad. What I point at is the danger of a 'false consensus' (Griggs and Howarth 2006: 87), one that is proclaimed by dominant actors but not supported by a large variety of actors (those who have been opposing earlier on and those who were never involved). A combination of the need for consensus and a managerial *sense of urgency* could lead to taking the easy way out: uniting stories in an abstract way, but not actors that support them.

[17] According to Mouffe (2005: 14-19) and Griggs and Howarth (2006) always involves conflict. Boundaries are always drawn between 'inside' and 'outside'. The trick is to create what Mouffe (2005) calls *agonistic pluralism*. Griggs and Howarth describe this as a model in which 'actors in the policy process actively and passionately contest substantive issues as adversaries – and not simply as competitors or enemies – recognizing each other's rights to differ and disagree (Griggs and Howarth 2006: 66).' The moment where adversaries turn into enemies (Edelman 1988) has been described in this study, most of all in Chapter 7.

[18] The concept of 'governing capacity', *bestuurskracht* (Derksen, et al. 1987), has been debated during the last couple of years (e.g. the second issue of the journal *Bestuurskunde* in 2007). Dutch Public Administration researchers (e.g., Bovens, et al. 2006) stress that municipalities and public organizations should combine being powerful (strong leadership, clear decisions) with being legitimate (support). In this combination I recognize the managerial and consensus story of governing (the last on in the form in which citizens are asked to participate). What is lacking is the political story of governing.

[19] This attitude reminds of Yanow's (1997) idea of *passionate humility*: 'the passionate conviction that we are right, coupled to the possibility that we might be wrong.'

Samenvatting (Summary in Dutch)

Gehoord op het gemeentehuis

Sinds het begin van het nieuwe millennium is de cultuur van het openbaar bestuur onderwerp van discussie. Door de rampen in Enschede en Volendam, maar ook als gevolg van politieke crises zoals in Den Helder en Delfzijl en naar aanleiding van de dualisering van gemeentebesturen, is het concept *bestuurscultuur* in de discussie over het lokaal bestuur veel gebruikt (Cachet, et al. 2001; Denters and Pröpper 2002; Bovens, et al. 2006). Aan het einde van het dualiseringsproces stelde de begeleidingscommissie dat bestuurscultuur 'de echte sleutel is voor verbetering' en 'misschien wel de belangrijkste factor […] voor de vernieuwing van het lokaal bestuur' (Begeleidingscommissie 2006b: 13). In dit proefschrift is het concept bestuurscultuur als een proces van betekenisgeving theoretisch verkend en empirisch onderzocht.

Bestuurscultuur

Om te beginnen is een overzicht gemaakt van voor de bestuurskunde relevante benaderingen van cultuur. Dit overzicht had betrekking op het cultuuronderzoek in de bestuurskunde en aanverwante disciplines (politieke wetenschappen en organisatiekunde). De volgende thema's zijn de revue gepasseerd: politieke cultuur (Almond and Verba 1963; Daemen 1983), de interdisciplinaire stroming die zich Culturele Theorie noemt (Thompson, et al. 1990; Hendriks 1996), organisatiecultuur (Frissen 1989; Veenswijk 1995; Schein 1997[1985]) en cultuur van het lokale bestuur (Cachet, et al. 2001; Denters and Pröpper 2002; Bovens, et al. 2006). De vergelijking van onderzoek van de verschillende thema's leert dat er twee belangrijke vragen zijn die door de onderzoekers verschillend beantwoord worden. De eerste vraag is of cultuur moet worden beschouwd als een 'ding' of als een 'proces' (Wright 1994). In het eerste geval wordt er vanuit gegaan dat cultuur per definitie gedeeld wordt en stabiel is. In het tweede geval wordt er verwacht dat cultuur onderwerp van strijd, gedeeltelijk ambigu en altijd in beweging is. De tweede vraag is of cultuur moet worden gezien als een variabele of als een metafoor (Smircich 1983a). In het eerste geval, in lijn met een (neo-)positivistische wetenschapsopvatting, is cultuur duidelijk te onderscheiden van andere variabelen als bijvoorbeeld gedrag of structuur. In het tweede geval, in lijn met een interpretatieve wetenschapsopvatting (Yanow 1996), wordt een culturele benadering van organisaties, en in dit geval gemeenten, voorgestaan. In dit onderzoek is gekozen voor de combinatie van een *cultuur-als-proces* en een interpretatieve wetenschapsopvatting. Cultuur wordt volgens deze benadering gezien als een proces van betekenisgeving. Daarnaast wordt betekenisgeving beschouwd in het licht van concrete handelingen. Cultuur is binnen deze benadering niet los te zien van andere variabelen en het is ook geen mysterieuze kracht die het handelen van actoren grotendeels bepaalt. Dit stelt de onderzoeker in staat om de dynamiek van strijd en ambiguïteit binnen betekenisgeving waar te nemen (vgl. Martin 1992).

Naast definities van het cultuurconcept en manieren van onderzoek doen is er aandacht geweest voor beelden van de Nederlandse manier van besturen. Vanouds wordt de Nederlandse bestuurscultuur beschouwd als een cultuur van drie C's: consultatie, compromis en consensus (Hendriks and Toonen 1998b). In de jaren zeventig en aan het begin van de jaren tachtig hebben zich twee nieuwe manieren van besturen aangediend: één waarin zaken worden gepolitiseerd en één waarin besluitvaardig besturen wordt gewaardeerd (Daalder 1995). Desalniettemin wordt gesuggereerd dat de manier van besturen die zo kenmerkend is voor het Nederlandse bestuur (met behulp van de drie C's) doorwerkt in het lokale bestuur (Schouw and Tops 1998).

Op basis van de keuze voor een bepaalde benadering en interesse in de manier waarop beelden van besturen zich zouden kunnen manifesteren in gemeenten, is de volgende centrale onderzoeksvraag gekozen: *Hoe geven actoren in gemeenten betekenis aan zaken waarmee zij zich geconfronteerd zien, van welke beelden van besturen maken zij gebruik en hoe gebruiken zij deze beelden?* De centrale onderzoeksvraag is onderzocht met behulp van literatuuronderzoek en empirisch onderzoek van vier cases in twee gemeenten.

Het interpretatief proces

Als actoren in gemeenten zich geconfronteerd zien met zaken (*issues*) waar zij betekenis aan moeten geven, zoals het ontbreken van een geschikt dorpscentrum of een gat in de begroting van de gemeente, begeven ze zich in een proces van betekenisgeving, ook wel interpretatief proces. Tijdens dit interpretatief proces stellen actoren zich twee vragen: *Wat is er aan de hand?* (cf. Goffman 1997: 153) en *Wat moeten we doen?* De eerste vraag heeft betrekking op de betekenis van het issue. De tweede vraag heeft betrekking op hetgeen onlosmakelijk verbonden is met betekenisgeving in de praktijk: de noodzaak tot handelen (Wagenaar 1997: 13). Er kunnen drie fasen van betekenisgeving (analytisch) worden onderscheiden in het interpretatief proces (zie figuur S1).

(A) Initiële Betekenis(sen) van Issue (1) → *(B) Strijd over Betekenis* → *(C) Uiteindelijke Betekenis(sen) van Issue (1)* → *Collectieve handeling*

of

Initiële Betekenis(sen) van Issue (2) → *Strijd over Betekenis* → ...

Figuur S1: Het interpretatieve proces

In de eerste fase (A) worden voorlopige betekenissen aan een issue gegeven. In de tweede fase (B) wordt er een gevecht geleverd over betekenissen. Tenslotte wordt de betekenis van een issue collectief vastgesteld en wordt er een collectief besluit genomen op basis van de betekenis die is gegeven (C) of wordt de aandacht van de actoren getrokken door een ander issue waarmee een nieuw interpretatief proces begint. In het eerste geval wordt een collectief besluit omgezet in collectief handelen. De verwachting was dat het interpretatief proces dynamisch zou zijn en wellicht geen duidelijk einde zou hebben. Het was daarnaast de verwachting dat sommige betekenissen verborgen zouden blijven.

Om de twee vragen te beantwoorden die actoren zich tijdens een interpretatief proces stellen , vertellen actoren elkaar verhalen (Rein and Schön 1977; Forester 1993). Verhalen bestaan uit *settings*, *gebeurtenissen* en *entiteiten* (cf. Czarniawska 1997: 39). Een *setting* is de algemene achtergrond tegen welke een verhaal zich afspeelt. Tijd en ruimte zijn twee belangrijke dimensies van een setting. Een setting is bijvoorbeeld een wijk van een stad gedurende het jaar 2004. Verhalen beschrijven ook wat er plaatsvindt, bijvoorbeeld dat een politieagent iemand hardhandig arresteert of dat er brand uitbreekt op een industrieterrein. *Gebeurtenissen* worden vaak gepresenteerd als handelingen van mensen. Ontwikkelingen vallen er ook onder. Denk bij dat laatste bijvoorbeeld aan het verslechteren van de relatie tussen het gemeentebestuur en inwoners van een bepaalde wijk. *Entiteiten* in verhalen zijn de actoren die handelen, de middelen waarmee zij handelen en actoren die van de gebeurtenissen profiteren of eronder lijden. Het hoeft bij actoren overigens niet alleen om mensen te gaan, het kan bijvoorbeeld ook gaan om organisaties of iets abstracts zoals het lot. Verhalen bevatten descriptieve en normatieve elementen. Van belang is dat ze de realiteit niet alleen beschrijven, maar deze ook duiden. Verhalen helpen om te bepalen welke settings, gebeurtenissen en entiteiten er toe doen. Ze geven betekenis aan issues, waarmee ze actoren in staat stellen om te bepalen wat er aan de hand is en wat er moet worden gedaan.

Vier cases

Omdat verhalen onderdeel zijn van het geheel van alle communicaties tussen actoren in een gemeente, en omdat sommige verhalen publiekelijk niet of nauwelijks worden verteld, moeten onderzoekers verhalen reconstrueren. In dit onderzoek zijn verhalen gereconstrueerd met behulp van etnografisch veldwerk. De interpretatieve processen werden van dichtbij gevolgd gedurende vijf tot zes maanden (per gemeente voor twee cases). Het veldwerk omvatte observaties van bijeenkomsten die al dan niet toegankelijk waren voor publiek, meer dan honderd interviews en vele conversaties met betrokken actoren en de verzameling van een grote verscheidenheid aan documenten.

In totaal zijn vier cases (interpretatieve processen) onderzocht in twee gemeenten van rond de 25.000 inwoners. In de eerste case (de Centrumplanning) waren actoren in Gemeente Zonder Hart op zoek naar de juiste locatie voor een nieuw centrum, een centrum dat een dorpshart moest worden. De gemeente was al 20 jaar in debat over een nieuw centrum, waarbij vooral de locatiekeuze een belangrijk discussiepunt was gebleken. In de tweede case (de Kerntakendiscussie) zag Gemeente Zonder Hart zich plotseling geconfronteerd met een gat in de gemeentelijke begroting van 1,8 miljoen Euro op jaarbasis. Als reactie hierop werd een Kerntakendiscussie gestart. In de derde case (de Crisis) werd de gemeenteraad van Vrije Stad geconfronteerd met het besluit van drie collegeleden om het vertrouwen in een vierde collegelid publiekelijk op te zeggen. Als snel ontwikkelde zich hieruit een bestuurscrisis. In de vierde en laatste case (de Stedelijke Vernieuwing) wilde het na de bestuurcrisis aangetreden college van burgemeester en wethouders van Vrije Stad op een terrein met een voetbalclub en stadstuinen een kleine nieuwe wijk bouwen. Bewoners in de omliggende wijk kwamen naar het gemeentehuis om tegen de plannen te protesteren. In alle vier de cases vertelden actoren elkaar verhalen over de problemen waarmee zij zich geconfronteerd zagen en de oplossingen die zij voor ogen hadden. Tijdens het onderzoek zijn twee typen verhalen gevonden die actoren in staat stellen om de vragen van het interpretatief proces te beantwoorden.

Praktijkverhalen

Het eerste type verhaal is het *praktijkverhaal* (Forester 1993). Dit type verhaal is gericht op het issue waar de actoren betekenis aan proberen te geven. Het praktijkverhaal levert een eerste antwoord op de vraag 'Wat is er aan de hand?' Een voorbeeld uit een van de cases kan duidelijk maken hoe een praktijkverhaal er uit zou kunnen zien. Aan het begin van de Kerntakendiscussie werd het volgende verhaal verteld: Terwijl ambtenaren in de gemeentelijke organisatie bezig waren met de voorbereiding van een financiële rapportage, kwamen zij er plotseling achter dat er een gat in de begroting zat. Hoewel praktijkverhalen duidelijke antwoorden kunnen geven op de vraag wat er aan de hand is (voorbeeld: er zit een gat in de begroting) en zelfs eenduidige handelingsvoorschriften kunnen bevatten (voorbeeld: we moeten 1,8 miljoen Euro besparen), bevatten praktijkverhalen die aan het begin van het interpretatief proces worden verteld vaak nog veel ambiguïteit. Actoren weten aan het begin van het interpretatief proces vaak nog niet zo goed wat er aan de hand zou kunnen zijn, of ze vertellen een verhaal dat onderhandelen over betekenis later in het proces mogelijk maakt. In de cases bleek dat de betekenis van issues tijdens het interpretatieve proces veranderde. Er werden tijdens de processen steeds nieuwe praktijkverhalen verteld, terwijl reeds bestaande werden aangepast of met elkaar gecombineerd.

Bestuursverhalen

Als actoren zich de vraag stellen 'Wat moeten *we* doen?', dan is het voor henzelf van belang dat zij weten wie *we* zijn en wat *we* normaliter doen of geacht worden te doen. Actoren in gemeenten maken voortdurend gebruik van basale beelden van wie ze zijn en wat ze doen. Uit deze beelden konden in dit onderzoek een tweede type verhaal, het zogenaamde *bestuursverhaal*, worden gereconstrueerd. Een *bestuursverhaal* is een verhaal over hoe er bestuurd wordt en zou moeten worden. In complexe organisatievormen zoals gemeenten zijn er constant enkele bestuursverhalen in omloop. In dit proefschrift zijn, met behulp van de analyse van de eerste cases en literatuur over gemeenten (Ringeling 1998; 2004), drie bestuursverhalen gereconstrueerd, namelijk een *consensusverhaal*, een *politiek verhaal* en een *managerial verhaal*.

Het consensusverhaal

Besturen betekent in het *consensusverhaal* op zoek gaan naar consensus. Als actoren worden geconfronteerd met een issue dat algemeen als relevant wordt ervaren, dan zullen zij op zoek gaan naar een praktijkverhaal dat recht doet aan even zoveel manieren van kijken als er onder de betrokkenen kunnen worden gevonden. Op basis van de literatuur over besturen in Nederland (zie bv. Hendriks and Toonen 1998b) zou je kunnen verwachten dat dit verhaal een prominente plek heeft in gemeenten. De Nederlandse manier van besturen werd immers getypeerd door *consultatie, compromis en consensus* (de drie C's). In dit bestuursverhaal wordt de gemeente gezien als een *gemeenschap*. In het besturen is het proces naar consensus belangrijker dan de inhoud van een uiteindelijk besluit. Betekenisgeving is een stroperig proces waar veel actoren aan bijdragen. Dit verhaal geeft echter geen duidelijk antwoord op de vraag wie tot de besturende gemeenschap behoort. Zijn dit slechts zij die van oudsher bestuurders worden genoemd (politici, wethouders en (hogere) ambtenaren), of behoren de burgers en de leden van het maatschappelijk middenveld hier ook toe?

In de cases bleek het consensusverhaal met name te worden gebruikt aan het begin van het interpretatieve proces en nadat polarisatie (zie politieke bestuursverhaal, hierna) had plaatsgevonden. Aan het begin van het interpretatieve proces werd consensus over een algemeen probleem gecreëerd. Dit zorgde voor een bepaald *commitment* (een vierde C) van de betrokken actoren. Daarnaast werd in drie van de vier onderzochte cases een compromis voorgesteld als reactie op of anticipatie op polarisatie. De pogingen om zowel strijdige praktijkverhalen als de actoren die verschillende verhalen steunden te verenigen, slaagden niet. Hoewel het consensusverhaal vaak als een ideaal werd aangeroepen, hield dit niet in dat veel actoren buiten het gemeentehuis in het besturen werden betrokken. De analyse van verborgen praktijkverhalen in de cases laat zien dat actoren in het gemeentehuis betekenis geven namens burgers en dat hierbij bepaalde interpretaties van problemen niet worden gerepresenteerd in het publieke debat. Het beeld van de politicus die niet bang is om besluiten te nemen voor de bevolking was belangrijker dan dat van de politicus die zich 'koste wat het kost' door de burgers wil laten vertellen wat zij van een bepaald issue vinden.

Het politieke verhaal

Het tweede bestuursverhaal is het *politieke verhaal*. Besturen betekent in dit verhaal vechten voor en tegen politieke visies. Als actoren worden geconfronteerd met een issue dat zij relevant vinden, zullen zij anderen proberen te overtuigen van hun praktijkverhaal over het issue. In dit bestuursverhaal wordt de gemeente gezien als een *slagveld*, waarop 'the winner takes it all' geldt. In het besturen staat de inhoud van het uiteindelijke besluit voorop. De aanwezigheid van een variëteit aan praktijkverhalen wordt in dit bestuursverhaal gewaardeerd, omdat het de mogelijkheid geeft om te kiezen. Actoren in gemeenten zien elkaar als tegenstanders of als bondgenoten. In het geval van politieke vetes en crises, worden tegenstanders wellicht vijanden. De politieke partijen in de raad vertegenwoordigen in dit verhaal de tegengestelde belangen en waarden die in een stad of dorp te vinden zijn. Zij representeren als het ware de subculturen die buiten het gemeentehuis te vinden zijn. Er is echter ook een historisch gegroeide politieke verhouding tussen hen die in het gemeentehuis werken als politicus of ambtenaar, en hen die bestuurd worden (de burgers en het maatschappelijk middenveld). Zij die in het gemeentehuis actief zijn zien zich als hoeders van het algemeen belang, die dat algemeen belang moeten verdedigen tegen allerhande tegenstanders van buiten die slechts uit zijn op hun individuele belang of groepsbelang.

In de cases werd het politieke verhaal vooral gebruikt om te praten over ongewenst gedrag van anderen en om de reikwijdte van de betekenisgeving te verruimen. In alle cases werd het politieke verhaal gebruikt om negatief te praten over hoe besluitvorming in het verleden had plaatsgevonden en om een beeld te scheppen van politici en burgers die alleen voor hun eigen belang en waarden opkomen. Toch werden in lijn met het politieke verhaal in drie cases gedurende de strijd om betekenis alternatieve praktijkverhalen aangedragen die het tot dan toe dominante verhaal bestreden. Het politieke verhaal kwam ook naar voren in de noodzaak om in drie van de vier cases te stemmen. In twee cases zagen de opponerende partijen aan het eind van het interpretatieve proces elkaar eerder als vijanden dan als tegenstanders (Edelman 1988: 66-68). Hoewel politiek debat in de cases wel degelijk plaatsvond, leek het politieke bestuursverhaal meer te maken te hebben met politiseren, polarisatie en (spel om de) macht - drie P's van politization, polarization and power(play) - dan met overtuiging – persuasion.

Het managerial verhaal

Het derde en laatste bestuursverhaal is het *managerial verhaal*. Besturen betekent in dit verhaal doelgericht handelen en tastbare producten maken. Als actoren worden geconfronteerd met een issue dat van belang wordt geacht, dan zullen zij het issue onderzoeken, besluiten nemen op basis van de feiten en deze besluiten implementeren. In dit bestuursverhaal wordt het beeld van de gemeente als *bedrijf* gecombineerd met een cultuur van besluitvaardigheid. Niet drie C's, maar drie E's spelen een rol: economy (zuinigheid), effectiveness (doeltreffendheid) en efficiency (doelmatigheid). In dit bestuursverhaal is het niet belangrijk welke inhoudelijke besluiten er worden genomen, zolang die besluiten er komen en uitvoerbaar zijn binnen de beperkingen van tijd en geld. Economische en wiskundige principes spelen een rol in de poging issues te depolitiseren. Als de 'feiten' gevonden zijn, zullen zij voor zichzelf spreken.

Het managerial bestuursverhaal speelde een zeer belangrijke rol in drie van de vier cases. Het werd ingezet vlak nadat de initiële probleemanalyse de steun van betrokken actoren had gekregen. Met behulp van een gecreëerde *sense of urgency* was dit bestuursverhaal min of meer in staat één praktijkverhaal te laten domineren en alternatieve en mogelijke conflicterende praktijkverhalen te marginaliseren. Het bood de mogelijkheid het geconstateerde probleem op te lossen met behulp van methodes en technieken. In alle cases werd het gebruik van het managerial bestuursverhaal bekritiseerd en in drie van de cases verloor het zijn dominante positie. Desalniettemin had het reeds zijn invloed gehad op de betekenisgeving. Aan het einde van de cases werd het managerial bestuursverhaal wederom van belang geacht omdat actoren van mening waren dat er een besluit moest worden genomen. In *Tabel S1* zijn de drie bestuursverhalen weergegeven aan de hand van het beeld van de gemeente, de definitie van besturen en de kernconcepten die erin een rol spelen.

Tabel S1: Drie bestuursverhalen

	Definitie van besturen	*Beeld van de gemeente*	*Kernconcepten*
Consensus	Op zoek naar consensus	Gemeenschap	Consultatie, compromis, consensus, commitment
Politiek	Vechten voor en tegen politieke visies	Slagveld	Polarisatie, politiseren, macht
Managerial	Doelgericht handelen en tastbare producten maken	Bedrijf	Zuinigheid, doelmatigheid, doeltreffendheid, feiten verzamelen

Cases vergeleken

De vergelijking van de cases leert veel over interpretatieve processen en het verhalen vertellen daarbinnen. Om te beginnen vertoont het gebruik van verhalen in de processen grote overeenkomsten. De verhalen die aan het begin van processen werden verteld, werden gedurende het proces gecombineerd met andere verhalen, met als resultaat gecompliceerde, hybride verhaalvormen. Daarnaast werd er in toenemende mate betekenis gegeven aan het proces van betekenisgeving zelf. De strijd om de betekenis van wat er aan de hand was werd al snel een strijd om de betekenis van besturen, als het dit van het begin af aan al niet was. Vervolgens was een opvallende overeenkomst te vinden in de ontwikkeling van het interpretatief proces. Het begon met een algemeen probleem waarover een bepaalde mate van consensus werd bereikt. Daarna werd een managerial manier van betekenis geven dominant. Ten slotte ontstond er conflict over de betekenis van het probleem. In drie van de vier processen leidde dit conflict over de betekenis van het probleem tot een vergrote reikwijdte van de betekenisgeving. Een vergrote reikwijdte hield in dat er alternatieve probleemdefinities werden geopperd, en dat die alternatieve probleemdefinities het probleem in een ruimere context plaatsten. Er kwam ook een grotere variëteit in de actoren die aan het proces deelnamen. In de Stedelijke Vernieuwing stelden bewoners dat bouwen van een nieuwe wijk niet aan de orde was omdat de geplande bebouwing onderdeel zou uitmaken van een reeds bestaande wijk (waaruit de protesterende bewoners afkomstig waren). In de cases in Gemeente Zonder Hart probeerde het college van burgermeester en wethouders de verschillende manieren om naar het probleem van het ontbrekende dorpshart te kijken te verenigen in voorstellen aan de gemeenteraad.

De vergelijkende analyse van bestuursverhalen in de cases laat zien dat alle drie bestuursverhalen in gebruik waren en dat geen van de verhalen een absolute dominantie had over de andere. De bestuursverhalen werden wel op verschillende manieren gebruikt in de verschillende fases van het interpretatief proces en door verschillende actoren. Ook werd het duidelijk dat bestuursverhalen werden ingezet omwille van hun onderlinge verschillen. Dat wil zeggen, dat het ene bestuursverhaal werd aangeprezen als alternatief voor een ander bestuursverhaal. Vooral de tegenstelling tussen het politieke verhaal en de andere twee verhalen werd benadrukt. In de Centrumplanning werd bijvoorbeeld gesteld dat het na alle emotionele politieke gevechten over het centrum (karakteristiek voor het politieke bestuursverhaal) tijd werd om samen op te trekken (consensusverhaal) en tot een rationeel besluit te komen op basis van de feiten (managerial verhaal). In de Stedelijke Vernieuwing stelde het college dat aantrad na de bestuurscrisis dat het na een periode van ambities en strijd (karakteristiek voor het politieke bestuursverhaal) tijd werd om ‘laaghangend fruit te plukken’. Dat hield in dat projecten die relatief eenvoudig te realiseren zijn (zoals het bouwen van de nieuwe wijk) voorrang zouden krijgen (managerial verhaal).

Verder is het van belang te constateren dat gedurende de interpretatieve processen de burgers en het maatschappelijk middenveld van Gemeente Zonder Hart en Vrije Stad slechts in beperkte mate in staat werden gesteld om een belangrijke rol te spelen in de betekenisgeving. Dit heeft er in meerdere cases toe geleid dat bepaalde praktijkverhalen over het hoofd werden gezien. Ten slotte kon er vanuit de coulissen af en toe de stem worden waargenomen van een vierde bestuursverhaal. Dat was een bestuursverhaal waarin zij die besturen geen duidelijk beeld hebben van de manier waarop zij de problemen het hoofd kunnen bieden. Hoewel dit misschien een begrijpelijke reactie is op een moeilijk te duiden samenleving (van Gunsteren 1994; Hajer and Wagenaar 2003b), weerhield dit dominante verhalenvertellers er niet van om verhalen te construeren die duidelijkheid en voortvarendheid uitstraalden en daarmee mogelijkheden om te komen tot handelen in het vooruitzicht stelden.

De werking van verhalen

In de interpretatieve processen bleken zowel praktijk- als bestuursverhalen een bepaalde 'werking' te hebben (Forester 1993). Verhalen hielpen ten eerste om problemen te construeren. Daarbij selecteerde de verteller settings, gebeurtenissen en entiteiten die volgens hem een belangrijke rol spelen.

Ten tweede hielpen verhalen om actoren te verenigen tegen gevaar van buitenaf. Verhalen moesten, wilden ze steun krijgen, de mogelijkheid bieden aan een variëteit aan toehoorders om er hun eigen ideeën in terug te zien. Omdat actoren het er vaak niet over eens waren met welk gevaar ze te maken hebben, bleek ambiguïteit hierbij belangrijk. Ambiguïteit van een praktijkverhaal, de mogelijkheid om meerdere betekenissen toe te kennen aan een issue met behulp van een verhaal, zorgde ervoor dat overeenstemming kon worden bereikt zonder dat helder werd tot welke collectieve handelingen het verhaal zou moeten leiden. Uit de cases bleek dat het verenigen van op het eerste gezicht conflicterende verhalen in een nieuw verhaal, ook wel *reframen* genoemd (Schön 1994[1979]; Schön and Rein 1994), meerdere malen werd toegepast. Zo stelde een fractieleider in de bestuurscrisis dat de collegeleden die het vertrouwen in hun collegewethouder hadden opgezegd niet alleen schuldig waren aan ontwikkelingen die tot de crisis hadden geleid, maar er zelf ook slachtoffer van waren geworden. Pogingen om de actoren die conflicterende verhalen steunden zelf bij elkaar te brengen liepen echter vast.

Ten derde kunnen verhalen gebruikt worden om contrasten te schetsen tussen bijvoorbeeld het verleden en het heden (of de toekomst), of tussen goed en fout. Het gevolg van die contrasten is het ontstaan van twee werelden: de wereld die is (of was) en de wereld die zou moeten zijn (Rein and Schön 1977). Daarbij was de redenering ongeveer als volgt: 'Het is gebleken dat de manier van werken die we tot nu toe hebben toegepast niet heeft gewerkt. Nu moeten we alles anders doen'. De selectie van bepaalde verhaalelementen uit het verleden, in het bijzonder momenten uit het verleden die duidden op het falen van eerdere pogingen om iets voor elkaar te krijgen, droegen bij aan het contrast dat actoren wilden scheppen.

Ten vierde hielpen verhalen ook om de betekenis van wat er aan de hand is te beperken, door de aandacht van de toehoorders in een bepaalde richting te sturen, bijvoorbeeld met behulp van categorieën en namen. Zo werden in de Kerntakendiscussie alle bezigheden van de gemeente op een zogenaamde productenlijst bijeen gebracht en weergegeven in termen van kosten. Dit hielp de verschillen tussen de bezigheden te verbergen en de overeenkomsten te benadrukken. In de Centrumplanning werden de locaties waarop mogelijk een nieuw centrum kon worden gebouwd met behulp van een 'multicriteria-analyse' gewaardeerd met een cijfer tussen de 1 en de 100 (met twee decimalen). De verschillen tussen de locaties werden hiermee teruggebracht tot een enkele dimensie. De beperkende werking die verhalen hadden, leidde er zelfs toe dat sommige interpretaties van problemen geen rol speelden in het publieke debat over een bepaald issue. De problemen die worden geïdentificeerd zijn dan niet de schadelijke omstandigheden waar mensen onder leiden (Edelman 1988).

Ten slotte stelden verhalen de actoren ook in staat om de betekenis van wat er aan de hand was op te blazen, of neutraler gesteld, in een breder verband te plaatsen. Zo werd in de Centrumplanning bijvoorbeeld voorgesteld om het besluit over de juiste locatie voor een nieuw centrum te zien als een beslissing die voor de komende 100 jaar van betekenis zou zijn (en niet voor 30 jaar, zoals eerder in het proces was voorgesteld). Hierdoor werd een tot dan toe als onbelangrijk ervaren locatie voor het nieuwe centrum ineens een interessant alternatief.

Het moet worden opgemerkt dat een en hetzelfde verhaal niet op vijf verschillende manieren tegelijk zijn uitwerking had. Sommige manieren waarop verhalen werken zijn tegengesteld. Daarnaast is het van belang de interpretatie van de verschillende toehoorders in de gaten te houden. Al met al is de manier waarop verhalen in staat zijn om de werkelijkheid van actoren in gemeenten te bepalen van cruciaal belang. Zoals uit de cases blijkt worden er nieuwe dorpscentra en wijken aangelegd, subsidies aan het maatschappelijk middenveld en individuele burgers stopgezet, ambtenaren, wethouders en burgemeesters ontslagen omdat een bepaalde constellatie van verhalen de steun krijgt van actoren met een beslissende stem.

De dynamiek van bestuurscultuur

Met behulp van de literatuurstudie en de cases is het ook mogelijk geworden te reflecteren op het idee van een consensuscultuur die zijn praktische uitdrukking krijgt in de drie C's van consultatie, compromis en consensus (Hendriks and Toonen 1998b). Zoals al bleek bij de bespreking van de bestuursverhalen zijn er zeker meerdere culturele tendensen waar te nemen in interpretatieve processen. Het is niet erg waarschijnlijk dat de onderzochte hierin hemelsbreed verschillen van vergelijkbare cases.[i] Een consensuscultuur zal naar verwachting niet zo snel als *stand-alone* cultuur kunnen worden aangetroffen. Niet alleen omdat er verschillende manieren van betekenisgevend besturen werden aangetroffen, maar ook omdat bij het aanprijzen van een bepaalde manier van besturen dit vaak werd gedaan met behulp van het aanduiden van verschillen met een alternatieve manier van besturen. Bestuurscultuur is een dynamisch proces waarin verschillende bestuursverhalen worden gebruikt om elkaar te construeren, te vervangen en te ondersteunen. De betekenissen die aan issues worden gegeven ontstaan *tijdens* dit proces. Deze kijk op bestuurscultuur verschilt van andere benaderingen, die de interactie, die zo wezenlijk is voor betekenisgeving, willen omzeilen door cultuur meetbaar te maken in termen van opvattingen van individuele actoren (Denters and Pröpper 2002) of die de dynamiek van cultuur reduceren door deze te definiëren als een samenhangend geheel van diepgewortelde tradities, stijlen en gewoonten (Bovens, et al. 2006) waarin actoren als het ware gevangen zitten (zie ook Cachet, et al. 2001).

De interpretatieve manier van onderzoek doen die in deze studie is toegepast, kan worden uitgebreid naar andere terreinen van onderzoek in gemeenten, bijvoorbeeld

[i] Hier moet overigens wel bij worden aangetekend dat een bepaald type cases is geselecteerd voor dit onderzoek, namelijk cases die door actoren in het gemeentehuis belangrijk werden gevonden en waarbij in principe een grote variëteit aan actoren betrokken zou kunnen worden.

bij de studie van de manier waarop verschillende interpretatieve processen op elkaar inwerken. Etnografisch veldwerk stelt ons in staat om inzicht te krijgen in de dagelijkse praktijk van gemeenten. De reconstructie en analyse van verhalen kan helpen om te zien hoe issues door de tijd heen een bepaalde betekenis toegedicht krijgen en andere betekenissen naar de achtergrond verdwijnen. Samen maken etnografie en verhaalanalyse het mogelijk gemeenten in al haar levendigheid te laten zien.

Aanbevelingen

Ten slotte zijn er vijf aanbevelingen te doen aan mensen in de praktijk: ambtenaren die werkzaam zijn in gemeenten en zij die werkzaam zijn in andere bestuurslagen en organen die zich inzetten voor gemeenten, burgers en mensen die actief zijn in het maatschappelijk middenveld, wethouders, burgemeesters en politici. De eerste aanbeveling is om cultuur niet te beschouwen als iets wat je eenvoudig kan vaststellen of zelfs veranderen en waar je daarna geen omkijken meer naar hebt. Pogingen om bestuursculturen te sturen van een centraal punt uit, zoals in de dualisering is geprobeerd, leveren niet exact het resultaat waarop werd gehoopt. Dit is het gevolg van de lokale interpretatie van beleid in het algemeen en dus ook de dualisering (Bovens, et al. 2006). Maar de bestuurscultuur van een gemeente is zelf ook geen eenduidig, samenhangend geheel. ‘De’ bestuurscultuur van een bepaalde gemeente kan alleen worden weergegeven nadat zij is gereconstrueerd. Dit reconstrueren gebeurt door zowel mensen in de praktijk als door onderzoekers op basis van theoretisch aannames bijvoorbeeld dat cultuur stabiel is en gedeeld wordt door de leden van een bepaalde gemeenschap. Het risico is dat diversiteit, conflict en ambiguïteit dan over het hoofd worden gezien. Het aanpassen en verbeteren van bestuurscultuur wordt daarmee een constante en reflectieve aangelegenheid.

De tweede aanbeveling voor mensen in de praktijk is om op te passen voor de belofte van eenduidige oplossingen. De pogingen in de cases leren dat actoren in gemeenten veel inventiviteit aan de dag kunnen leggen als het erop aankomt om verschillende, schijnbaar tegengestelde verhalen aan elkaar te verbinden. Maar, zoals de cases ook lieten zien, is als bestuurder in staat zijn om een probleem te *reframen* (Schön 1994[1979]; Schön and Rein 1994) - waarbij verschillende visies op een probleem worden verbonden in een overkoepelend verhaal – niet hetzelfde als het bij elkaar brengen van de actoren die verschillende verhalen steunen. De praktijk is weerbarstiger (Miller 1985). De aanbeveling aan mensen in de praktijk is om op te passen voor de belofte dat tegenstellingen zijn overbrugd zodra een overkoepelende probleemdefinitie is gevonden.

De derde aanbeveling is de toepassing van de tweede aanbeveling op het niveau van de gemeente. Onlangs kwam de Commissie Toekomst Lokaal Bestuur (2006; zie ook VNG 2006a) met een nieuw concept: bindend besturen. Volgens de commissie staat bindend besturen voor ‘een vorm van inrichting van het gemeentelijk bestuur, waarbij bestuurders vanuit een duidelijke visie op te bereiken resultaten, verbinding weten te maken met burgers en maatschappelijke organisaties’ (Commissie Toekomst Lokaal Bestuur 2006: 36-37). Centraal in bindend bestuur is het idee van het verbinden van verschillende partijen in de gemeente, iets wat de commissie ook duidelijk als taak ziet van het gemeentebestuur. Maar tegelijkertijd lijkt ‘binden’ voor de commissie ook te staan voor een soort leiderschap waarbij vooraf resultaten worden bepaald die moeten worden bereikt terwijl een duidelijke visie de leidraad is (2006: 36-41). De verschillende deels conflicterende manieren van besturen worden hiermee eenvoudig verenigd in het concept bindend besturen. Het is de vraag of een dergelijk toekomstbeeld realistisch is. Bestuurders en andere mensen die in, voor of met de gemeente werken kunnen maar beter oppassen voor de illusie die bindend besturen oproept.

De vierde aanbeveling aan de praktijk is om meer ruimte te bieden aan variëteit en onenigheid. Hoewel het politieke bestuursverhaal in elk van de onderzochte cases een rol speelde, kan gesteld worden dat actoren in de gemeenten over het algemeen een nogal negatieve houding hadden ten opzichte van het politieke bestuursverhaal. Dit zorgde ervoor dat alternatieve interpretaties van een probleem soms werden geschuwd, wat er zelfs toe leidde dat oplossingen werden gezocht voor problemen die door betrokken burgers en anderen niet eens als een probleem wordt ervaren. Hoewel het niet aan te bevelen is om conflicten te starten die eindigen in crises zoals in de Crisis-case in dit onderzoek, kunnen variëteit en onenigheid de kwaliteit van interpretatieve processen en wellicht van democratische besluiten ten goede komen (vgl. van Gunsteren 2006). Het zou de revitalisatie van de lokale democratie en kunnen helpen verwezenlijken en de bestuurskracht van gemeenten kunnen vergroten. Hierbij zou het vooral moeten gaan om pogingen te overtuigen, niet om machtsspel. Ook als lokaal bestuur in Nederland uiteindelijk zijn kracht moet halen uit de drie C's van consultatie, compromis en consensus, dan zou het toch ook gebaat kunnen zijn bij een overtuigende representatie van de diversiteit in de samenleving voordat er gezocht wordt naar een voor allen acceptabel besluit. Het is aan actoren in gemeenten om variëteit en onenigheid niet uit de weg te gaan maar ze ruimte te geven. Zij die het lokaal bestuur ondersteunen vanuit een andere bestuurslaag of een bestuursorgaan zouden kunnen nadenken – voorbij de dualisering - over de condities waaronder variëteit en onenigheid kunnen gedijen.

De vijfde en laatste aanbeveling heeft betrekking op verhalen vertellen. De aanbeveling aan actoren in de praktijk is om aandacht te besteden aan verhalen. Zij zouden zich voortdurend de vraag moeten stellen: 'Welk verhaal wordt hier verteld?' In een verhalende gemeente (vgl. Boje 1991) luisteren actoren nauwgezet naar de verhalen over problemen die dagelijks in het gemeentehuis en erbuiten worden verteld. Actoren vertellen ook hun eigen verhaal, maar doen tegelijkertijd hun best om andere verhalen te doorgronden en respecteren. In de context van specifieke issues kunnen actoren gebruik maken van meer gerichte vragen. Door gebruik te maken van inzicht in de vorm van verhalen (setting, gebeurtenissen en entiteiten) kunnen actoren erachter komen welke verhaalelementen ertoe bijdragen dat een bepaalde betekenis wordt verleend aan een bepaald issue. Door gebruik te maken van inzicht in de werking van verhalen kunnen actoren analyseren op welke manier een bepaald verhaal problemen en oplossingen helpt construeren, verenigen, contrasteren, beperken en opblazen. Ten slotte kunnen actoren de relatie tussen problemen, oplossingen en de gemeente met behulp van verhalen in kaart brengen en beter begrijpen. De bestuursverhalen die in dit onderzoek naar voren zijn gebracht kunnen worden ingezet om te zien welke beelden van gemeenten in gebruik zijn en welke beelden van gemeenten worden gemarginaliseerd of verborgen. De hier aangereikte vragen mogen eenvoudig lijken, maar ze zijn van cruciaal belang voor betekenisgeving in gemeenten. Als actoren in gemeenten zich deze vragen dagelijks stellen, zullen zij misschien tot de conclusie komen dat de verhalende gemeente tot leven is gekomen.

Curriculum Vitae

Merlijn van Hulst was born on November 1, 1976. After getting his master degree (doctorandus) in Cultural Anthropology he worked for some time as a consultant. At the end of 2002 he joined the department of Public Administration at the Erasmus University in Rotterdam and started the research that has been described in the previous pages. As of January 2008 he works as an Assistant Professor at the Tilburg School of Politics and Public Administration. E-mail: M.J.vanHulst@uvt.nl

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