

Public Management and Policy Networks: The Theoretical Foundation of the Network Approach to Governance

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Summary

In this paper we focus on network management as a form of public management and we outline the theoretical backgrounds of it. The policy network approach aims at both analysing and explaining complex processes of policy formation as well as formulating prescriptions to improve the management of these processes. Public management in this approach means a new definition of the role of government. In networks, governments are not dominant actors that can unilaterally impose their will upon other actors. This implies that public management must consider norms and values that go beyond the criteria of effectiveness and efficiency that dominate the debate about new public management.

Although the policy-network approach has developed in a more or less coherent body of knowledge in policy science, it has not remained unchallenged. One major point of criticism is that because of the descriptive character of the approach and its lack of theoretical basis, the network approach is unable to provide explanations of outcomes of policy processes. Another element of criticism concerns the evaluation criteria that some authors suggest for the network approach in order to assess the development and outcome of policy processes. These evaluation criteria are considered to be vague or lacking a substantive norm, thus they insufficiently acknowledge the influence of the goals of governments. As a result of all this, the prescriptions which are put forward by the network theory are said to be lacking a clear theoretical and normative basis.

In this paper we address this criticism and elaborate some of the central concepts of network theory and network management. We suggest that the network approach builds on several theoretical traditions. After this we clarify the theoretical concepts and axioms of the policy network approach and argue that this framework has important explanatory power both on the level of strategic interaction processes as well as on the level of institutional relations. Furthermore, we clarify the role of conflict and power relations within networks and network theory. We discuss evaluation criteria, prescriptions and the theoretical insights on which they are based. We conclude with some observations on the role of public actors as network managers. We argue that government's special resources and its unique legitimacy as representative of the common interest make it the outstanding candidate for fulfilling the role of network manager. A role which means arranging and facilitating interaction processes within networks in such a way that problems of under or non representation are properly addressed and interests are articulated and dealt with in an open, transparent and balanced manner.

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1. Introduction: networks and the governance debate

The apparently wide consensus about the fact that government is not the cockpit from which society is governed and that policymaking processes are generally an interplay between actors, has resulted in a full-scale search for new steering methods and a discussion on governance and public management (Kooiman, 1993; Rhodes, 1996). At the same time the discussion on these concepts is fused by the discussion on managerial reform in public administration and the adoption of business management techniques, under the heading of New Public Management (NPM), to implement these reforms (Pollit, 1990; Kickert and Van Vught, 1997).

Governance, public management and network management

Governance can roughly be described as ‘directed influence of societal processes’. It covers all kinds of guidance mechanisms and stresses that guidance is a result of complex mechanisms, which do not only originate from public actors (Kooiman, 1993; Kickert/Klijn/Koppenjan, 1997). Given the above statement on the nature of policy processes it is no surprise that the word ‘governance’ has become a catchword in the last few years and that it is been used in many different meanings. Rhodes (1996) finds at least six separate uses of the concept. There seem to be however two different groups of meaning. On the one hand governance stands for notions of reducing the state or making a difference between government and governance. Government should be reduced or do more with less (Osborne/Gaebler, 1992) mainly by using New Public Management techniques. On the other hand the term governance is reserved for theories and pleas which argue that public guidance should take into account the interdependencies of public actors and (semi) private actors. In this last meaning governance stands for something like self-organising networks. Ideas on network management, which are the focus of this article, fit in this last meaning of governance. Both meanings of governance however have totally different perspectives on public guidance, the role of government in society and draw their theoretical inspiration from very different sources.

While ‘new public management’ represents an attempt to translate managerial ideas from the private sector, like contracting out, client orientation and the introduction of market mechanisms to public organisations (Pollit, 1990, Kickert and Van Vught, 1997), ‘network management’ as an alternative method of guidance, focuses more on intermediating and co-ordinating interorganisational policy making. The theoretical basis for this alternative view is found in the network approach to policy that has acquired a prominent position in policy science and public administration. This is illustrated by the number of publications on policy networks and network management in Europe (Wilks and Wright, 1987; Rhodes, 1988; Marin and Mayentz, 1991; Marsh and Rhodes, 1992; Glasbergen, 1995; Kickert, Klijn and Koppenjan, 1997) and in the United States (Milward and Wamsley, 1985; Provan and Milward, 1995; O’Toole, 1997). Along with its growth in popularity, the policy network approach and the ideas on network management have also met with frequent criticism.

Criticism on the network approach

The most important critical remarks can be ‘stored’ under five headings:

- *Lack of theoretical foundations and clear concepts.* A major point of criticism is that the network approach is not based on a solid theoretical body of knowledge as a result of which a coherent theoretical framework is lacking and its concepts are unclear (Börzel, 1998)
- *Lack of explanatory power.* According to some critics the network approach is primarily ‘metaphoric’. It is highly descriptive and does not provide for the explanations of outcomes of policy processes (see Dowding, 1995; Salancik, 1995; Blom-Hansen, 1998; Börzel, 1998).
- *Neglect of the role of power.* Another criticism is that that the network approach, and especially that part which focuses on network management, emphasises too much the role of co-operation and consensus and ignores conflict, power and power differences (Brans, 1997).
- *Lack of clear evaluation criteria.* Because the network approach rejects the use of ex ante formulated goals as evaluation criteria, it is said that the approach does not provide for a clear evaluation framework. The evaluation criteria it suggests are considered to be vague and lacking a substantive norm. Thus the approach insufficiently acknowledge the influence of the goals of governments (Pröpper, 1996; Brans, 1997).
- *Normative objections against networks and the role of public actors therein.* Critics argue that the network approach considers government organisations too much of an equal to other organisations, and it neglects their role as guardian of the general interest. When government strategies are based on network theory this will seriously jeopardise policy innovation, the pursuit of the common good and the primacy of politics. (Ripley and Franklin 1987, Marin and Mayntz 1991, De Bruijn/Ringeling, 1997; Rhodes, 1996).

The focus of this article

We believe that some of this criticism is right and justified, and should be taken very seriously. But some of the criticism does not do justice to the network approach. *Aim of this article is to critically evaluate both the network approach and the criticism it has encountered in order to clarify existing misunderstanding and to improve network theory as a framework for the explanation, evaluation and improvement of public policy and public management.*

We do this by systematically addressing the above mentioned five points of criticism. We first review the theoretical background and concepts of the network approach (section 2). We show that the network approach is solid rooted in the theoretical history of policy science and organisation theory and that it has a rather well developed set of concepts. In section 3 we try to systemise the explanations of interactions and outcomes of policy processes that the network approach offers. We try to strengthen the framework on the institutional level by introducing the concept rules and trust. In section 4 we clarify the role of power and conflict in networks. In section 5 we address the problem of evaluation and evaluation criteria in networks. In section 6 we elaborate upon the misunderstandings which surround the role of public organisations in networks and try to provide for management strategies which help governments to adequately operate under network conditions. In the last section we discuss some topics which need further theoretical, empirical and normative consideration.

2. The Theoretical Foundation of the Network Approach

A major point of criticism on the network approach is that it lacks a theoretical foundation and clear concepts. But is this true? In this section we reject the suggestion that the network approach misses a theoretical basis. In the contrary, there is a rich theoretical tradition on which the approach is founded, which partly explains the second part of the criticism: the confusion about what the core concepts of the network approach are. Building upon this criticism we suggest a framework that presents the conceptual clarification asked for.

The theoretical roots of the policy network approach

The use of the network concept in policy science dates back to the early 1970s. In implementation studies, especially in what has become known as the 'bottom-up approach' (see Hjern and Porter, 1981), as well as in intergovernmental relations literature (see Friend, et al., 1974; and the very influential work of Scharpf: Scharpf, et al., 1978), the concept has been used to map relation patterns between organisations and to assess the influence of these relations patterns for policy processes. In these two early uses of the network approach to policy one can find the influence of theoretical notions from interorganisational theory and insights from the interactive perspective on public policy (Hufen and Ringeling, 1990; Klijn, 1997).

The interactive policy approach in policy science is visible in the work of authors such as Allison (1971), Cohen, March and Olsen (1972), and Lindblom (Lindblom, 1965; Lindblom and Cohen, 1979). In the work of these authors, policy appears as the result of an interaction between a multitude of actors. Conflicting interests characterise policy processes and problem definitions are dynamic and unpredictable.

The policy network approach builds on this process model since it also focuses attention on the interaction processes between interdependent actors and the complexity of objectives and strategies as a consequence of that interaction. An important difference with the process model is that in the network approach, more attention is given to the institutional context in which complex interactions take place. In an attempt to elaborate the institutional context of complex interaction processes, network theoreticians are inspired by interorganisational theory (Levine and White, 1961; Negandi, 1975; Aldrich, 1979).

The central starting point of the interorganisational approach is that the environment of organisations consists of other organisations. In order to survive, an organisation requires resources from other organisations. These organisations engage in exchange relations with each other and a network of mutually dependent actors emerges. There is substantial attention in interorganisational theory for the links between organisations and the strategies used by organisations to influence the exchange processes (see e.g. Levine and White, 1961; Aldrich and Whetten, 1981; Benson, 1982; Cook, 1977).

As it has evolved, the policy network approach has developed its own, distinctive theoretical framework. The network approach assumes that policy is made in complex interaction processes between a large number of actors which takes place within networks of interdependent actors. These actors are mutually dependent so policy can only be realised on the basis of co-operation. This co-operation, however, is by no means simple or spontaneous, and it requires types of game management and network constitution. The central starting points of the network approach are elaborated below.

Clarification of central concepts: Policy Networks as a Context of Interactions

The network approach assumes that actors are mutually dependent. Actors cannot achieve their

objectives without resources that are possessed by other actors (Scharpf, 1978; Benson, 1982; Rhodes, 1988). Interaction patterns between actors emerge around policy problems and resource clusters, and these patterns acquire a degree of sustainability because of the limited substitutability of resources. Rules develop which regulate the behaviour of actors and resource distribution in the network, and this also influence interactions within networks. Resource distribution and rules are gradually shaped in interactions, but they are also solidified and altered in these interactions (Giddens, 1984). Thus the created policy networks form a context within which actors act strategically and in which strategic action is confronted by the strategic action of others.

Within networks, series of interactions occur around (policy) issues. These series of interactions can be called games (Crozier and Friedberg, 1980; Rhodes, 1981; Scharpf, 1997). Their positions in the network and the strategic action in the game determine the positions of the players in the individual games. During the game, actors operate within the established resource distribution and set of rules, which are to a large extent framed by the network. In addition, they have to operate strategically in order to handle the given dependencies in the game so that they can achieve their own objectives. During this action, they interpret the existing rules that are, after all, ambiguous (March and Olsen, 1989; Klijn, 1996a).

Policy processes can thus be seen as a collection of games between actors. In these games, each of the various actors has its own perceptions of the nature of the problem, the desired solutions, and of the other actors in the network. On the basis of these perceptions, actors select strategies. The outcomes of the game are a consequence of the interactions of strategies of different players in the game. These strategies are however influenced by the perceptions of the actors, the power and resource divisions in the network and the rules of the network. We will elaborate this in the next section.

Concerted Action and Network Management

A central question within the network approach is how concerted action is established around a concrete issue. Actors need to co-operate in order to achieve satisfying outcomes. This is not always easy, despite durable dependencies, since major conflict may arise at the process level about, for instance, the distribution of costs and benefits of a solution. Policy is made and policy processes occur in the tension between dependency and diversity of goals and interests. And while this tension can be more or less regulated by the rules and resource distribution in the network, the tension will exist and needs to be solved in any policy game.

Since co-operation and collaboration of goals and interests does not happen of its own accord, steering of complex games in networks is necessary. These steering strategies, i.e. network management, are primarily focused on the improvement of co-operation between involved actors (O'Toole, 1988). The (implicit) assumption is that satisfying outcomes for actors are not possible without network management. Network management is thus an independent variable in the development of policy processes.

In the literature on network management, a distinction is made between two types of network management strategies: process management and network constitution (for extensive discussion, see Klijn, Koppenjan and Termeer, 1995; Kickert, Klijn and Koppenjan, 1997). *Process management* intends to improve the interaction between actors in policy games. In essence this concerns steering strategies which seek to unite the various perception of actors and solve the organisational problem that various organisations that, in having autonomously developed their strategy, are not

automatically in concert with one another. In doing so, actors cannot unilaterally determine each other's strategy. Important is that strategies of process management assume the structure and composition of the network as given. So, rules (formal or informal), resource divisions and existing actors are treated as a given starting point for the management strategies. Important process management strategies are:

- the selection and activation of actors (Hanf and Scharpf, 1978; Friend et. al., 1974); to take successful policy initiatives actors with the necessary resources must be selected and motivated to participate;
- the improvement of mutual perception about an issue or solution; given the fact that actors have different perceptions on the problem, solution and existing situation, network management must be aimed at creating a minimum convergence of perceptions and at creating packages of goals which are acceptable for a workable coalition of actors;
- the creation of temporary organisational arrangements between organisations; because co-ordination between different actors is not secured, organisational arrangements have to be created to sustain interactions and co-ordinate strategies;
- the improvement and supervision of interactions by means of process- and conflict management (Mandell, 1990; Susskind and Cruikshank, 1987).

Network constitution is focused on realising changes in the network. Based on the assumption that the institutional characteristics of the network also influence strategies, co-operation opportunities of actors, attempts can be made to change one or more of these characteristics. In general, these strategies are time consuming since they seek institutional change. As a result, they are usually unsuitable for influencing policy games that are already underway. Network constitution strategies can be focused on:

- changing the position of actors or the introduction of new actors; introducing new actors in the network can bring new perceptions but can also change given positions of power and regularities in interaction;
- changing the rules (for instance those that regulate access to a process) (Ostrom, 1986); changing (in)formal rules can lead to different patterns of interactions of frames. Changing conflict regulating mechanism for instance can lead to other strategies and interaction patterns because actors want to avoid binding conflict resolution
- reframing (fundamentally alter ideas about the functioning and the substantive problems of the network) (Rein and Schön, 1992); sometimes it seems necessary to start radical changes in perceptions on sectoral problems or ways of doing. Mostly central government tries to achieve this by radical system changes, but sometimes actors within networks themselves try to achieve this.

The literature on the network approach explicitly mentions that network management is far from easy. It requires knowledge of the network and numerous skills including negotiation skills since network management strategies are conducted in a situation of mutual dependency. Thus a network manager is not a central actor or director, but rather a mediator and stimulator (Forester, 1989). This role is not necessarily intended for only one actor. Even though public actors often assume the role of network manager, other actors can do so as well. Which actor has the authority and possibility to fulfil the role of network manager is most certainly influenced by the strategic position of actors and

the (behavioural) rules in use in the network (Ostrom, 1986, Burns and Flam, 1987). The most important theoretical assumptions of the network approach are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1 Theoretical assumptions of the Policy Network Approach

	Theoretical Assumptions
Networks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · actors are mutually dependent for reaching objectives; · dependencies create sustainable relations between actors; · dependencies create some veto power for various actors; · the sustainability of interactions creates and solidifies a resource distribution between actors; · in the course of interactions, rules are formed and solidified which regulate actor behaviour; · resource distribution and rule formation lead to a certain closeness of networks for outside actors.
Policy Processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · within networks, interactions between actors about policy(issues) take place focused on solving the tension between dependencies on the one hand and the diverging and conflicting interests on the other; · in doing so actors depart from perceptions they hold about the policy area, the actors, and the decisions at stake; · actors select specific strategies on the basis of perceptions; · policy process are complex and not entirely predictable because of the variety of actors, perceptions, and strategies.
Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · policy is the result of complex interactions between actors who participate in concrete games in a network.
Network Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · given the variety of goals and interests and - as a result - the (potential) conflict about the distribution of costs and benefits, co-operation is not automatic and does not develop without problems; · concerted action can be improved through incentives for co-operation, through process- and conflict management, and through the reduction of risks linked to co-operation.

3. The Network Approach as an Explanatory Model

The concept of network is said to be merely a metaphor as a result of which the network approach lacks real explanatory power. An import issue in this regard is the multilevel character of policy processes in networks. The question is raised to what extent structural approaches of networks can explain policy outcomes and processes. How do these network features relate to actor behaviour and their interactions (see Downing 1995, Blom-Hansen 1997, Börzel 1998)? In this section we therefor address the questions: what are the characteristic of the explanations the network approach comes up with, and how do they deal with this multilevel problem?

We suggest that the co-operation problem is central to the policy network approach. Given the dependency of actors on each other's resources, policy can only be established when actors make their resources available. In the network approach, explanations for the success or failure of policy

processes are sought in the inability to achieve co-operation. Co-operation is not realised when interactions between actors stagnate, are blocked, or led to undesired or unforeseen consequences, or because interactions are influenced by institutional characteristics. These last explanations are based on the premise that rules limit the behaviour of actors even when there is a possibility that actors violated these rules (un)consciously.

Thus, explanations for the development of interaction processes in networks are found both in institutional characteristics - the resources and the rules -, and in the characteristics of the interaction situation - the players, their stakes, and their strategies - (also see, for instance, Scharpf, 1997). As both Downing (1995) and Blom-Hansen (1997) state, that to arrive at explanations the sociological network orientations which focus on the structural dimensions of networks should be combined with an actor and interaction approach.

Process Variables as Factors for Success and Failure

The network approach assumes that policy outcomes are the result of interaction of strategies of various actors. The involvement of these actors is a consequence of the fact that they possess resources that requires their involvement in the handling and solution of a particular problem. They can block interaction processes by withdrawing their resources; they have veto power. Replacement of these resources is not always possible and when it is, it might be costly and time consuming. The same can be said for attempts to coerce co-operation, for instance by ordering a municipality to change its zoning plan if it does not do so of its own accord.

An important explanation for failing to realise concerted policy outcomes is the fact that actors are insufficiently aware of their external dependencies. In this case they assume that they can solve the problem alone or that they can impose their solution on other actors. But even when actors are aware of their external dependencies, it is often quite an undertaking to bring the various goals and interests together. Differences and disagreements in perceptions between actors may cause conflicts and block the interaction. Only when actors are able to bring their perceptions together and formulate common goals and interests, will policy games lead to satisfactory outcomes. Learning processes are thus very important in policy games and process management seeks to stimulate these. Preferences of actors are not fixed (Weick, 1979; March, 1988). Discovering new goals that are interesting to actors can prevent stagnation.

On the other hand, actors may lose interest in policy games so that stagnation occurs. These can be the consequence of the low priority that a policy problem has in the perception of one or more actors. Stagnation and blockades may also be a consequence of an undesirable balance between interaction costs and expected outcomes of policy games or of risks related to policy games as a consequence of unexpected strategies of others. Thus there is a risk that as soon as they have established profit in the interaction process, actors exit or threaten to exit, which leaves other actors empty-handed. This problem typically exists when parties commit to transaction-specific investments that cannot or not easily be used for other transactions (Williamson, 1979; Barney and Hesterly, 1997). And then there is always the danger that outsiders may profit from the mutual efforts of a limited group, without making any contribution to the cause (free-rider problem). In this case, network management should focus on the organisation of interactions and the protection of interests of actors involved (De Bruijn, Ten Heuvelhof and In 't Veld, 1998).

Concerted action thus requires that actors are able to assess their mutual dependencies and possibilities of co-operation and that the risks and costs involved are limited. Lack of awareness of

mutual dependencies, conflicts of interests, interaction costs and risks are important explanations for the failure of concerted policy. Conversely, the emergence of concerted action is explained through the acknowledgement of mutual dependencies, converging perceptions, the existence of incentives which improve co-operation, and the limitation of interaction risks through the application of types of game management.

The Structure of the Network as Explanation

As argued, explanations for the success or failure of policy processes are divided into process variables and factors connected to the structure of the network. Concerted solutions have to be established in games. When network level factors for the explanation of success and/or failure of policy and policy processes are included, game and network are linked; after all, it concerns the question of how characteristics at the network level influence the development of the game.

Intensive interaction between actors creates a specific resource distribution that influences the functioning of the network. Actors recognise/acknowledge that certain resources are relevant or even necessary to the realisation of policy outcomes. These resources provide actors with veto power. The resources enable them to veto interaction processes and they thus acquire a privileged position in the network and in the games within that network. The greater the veto power of an actor, the more indispensable the actor is to the policy games. The success of policy games is thus partially determined by the degree to which indispensable resources, and the actors who own them, are involved (Scharpf, 1997). Changes in the resource distribution in the networks are, therefore, reflected in the policy games. Thus, ten years ago it would have been unthinkable that commercial project developers would have any role at all in Urban Renewal policy in the Netherlands. But now that resources in the housing network have been redistributed and national government subsidies for public housing have declined, these actors are involved.

In addition, the degree to which actors participating in an interaction process are also connected in more encompassing interaction patterns and rules is important (Ostrom, 1986; Burns and Flam, 1987; Ostrom, Gardner and Walker, 1994). Interactions between actors from various networks may be difficult because they do not interact otherwise or have few rules to regulate their interactions. In other words: automatic co-ordination mechanisms and a degree of trust are lacking, and this results in higher interaction costs (see Hindmoor, 1998, on the embeddedness of interactions).

Rules play an important role in the development of policy processes. Rules enable actors to depart from minimal institutional agreements in their interaction. This reduces transaction costs and simplifies collaboration (Scharpf, 1997; Hindmoor, 1998). Initially, without knowledge of the network, it is difficult to arrive at general statements about the influence of rules on policy networks. Rules are social constructions of actors in a network, and they differ from network to network. Research has shown, however, that rules of conflict management and mediation, as well as rules to protect autonomy and position, are important for determining the possibility of co-operation (Klijn, 1996; Scharpf, 1997). The stronger the territorial demarcations in a network and the weaker the rules for conflict management and mediation, the more difficult decisionmaking will be. The lack of trust and useful sanctions makes it difficult to prevent exploitative behaviour on the part of actors.

These examples illustrate the structuring nature of rules in networks. They can improve or limit certain styles of interaction. Thus the lack of conflict regulating mechanisms and trust will more quickly lead to non-co-operative outcomes of 'mixed-motive' policy games which usually result in

less for the actor than more co-operative strategies. There are no mechanisms to prevent or decrease incidences of opportunistic behaviour (Scharpf, 1997). The central characteristic by which these outcomes are produced is trust. Scharpf concludes, 'In other words, being able to trust, and being trusted, is an advantage - but exploiting trust may be even more advantageous' (Scharpf, 1997: 89). Rules are one of the most important pillars of trust, but herein lies a problem. Actors can violate rules, whether formal or informal, because the result might be attractive to the actor. In this sense, rules do regulate but not determine and they can be changed. Each analysis of decisionmaking in networks must take this into account. Particular attention should be focused on the process of reformulation and (re)interpretation of rules as a consequence of circumstances external to the network and the strategic choices of actors. Table 2 summarises the most important explanations for the success and failure of policy processes in networks.

Table 2 Some of the More Important Explanations for Success and Failure from the Perspective of the Network Management Approach

	Explanations for Success and Failure
At Interaction Level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · the degree to which actors are aware of their mutual dependencies; · the degree to which actors succeed in redefining diverging and conflicting interests into a common interest; · the degree to which interaction costs are balanced favourably or unfavourably with perceived outcomes of the interaction; · the degree to which risks of the interaction within the game as a consequence of strategies of other actors are limited; · the degree to which game management is foreseen (mutual perception development; arrangements; game and conflict management)
At Network Level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · the degree to which actors possess veto power since their resources are indispensable; · the degree to which actors with veto power are actually involved in the process; · the degree to which actors in a game belong to the same network, which is that they also interact with each other elsewhere and have developed mutual rules; · the degree to which defined problems and solutions, and the way these are handled, fit within the rules developed in the network.

4 The role of power and conflict in networks

Within the network approach literature, the publications that emphasise network management are subject to the critique that co-operation is elevated to the norm and conflict and differences in power are insufficiently considered (Brans, 1997, De Bruijn/Ringeling, 1997). Indeed, co-operation is an important element of network theory, both with respect to the explanations of success and failure as well as for prescriptions. But power and conflict are not excluded from consideration.

Power, conflict and durable relations

Without co-operation, actors who find themselves in situations of mutual dependencies cannot realise their objectives. This does not mean that co-operation is established without conflict. Nor does it mean that actors will manage to co-operate. Durable dependency relations do not necessarily mean that no conflict will emerge over the distribution of costs and benefits in concrete policy processes. As an example, one need only consider labour relations where employers and labour unions maintain a durable relationship characterised by both co-operation and conflict. It is exactly this tension between co-operation and conflict which needs to be resolved (Scharpf, 1997).

The lack of a dominant actor does not imply that resources are equally distributed among actors (Knight, 1992). Also, rules may operate to the advantage of some, and to the disadvantage of other actors. This is implied by the fact that rules have been formed during earlier interactions. The inequalities resulting from earlier interactions are incorporated into the existing rules. A change of rules is thus also (but not exclusively) a battle for power between actors (Burns and Flam, 1987). In this sense the network approach has much attention for 'invisible' forms of power', traditionally known as 'the mobilisation of bias' (Barach/Baratz, 1962) like rules which shape the problem definitions and entrees of the actors in games and networks.

In short: the differences in the distribution of resources matter: actors will use them to influence the process and the substance of the interaction. A project developer or a municipality will generally be able to wield more influence over building plans than citizens' organisations. Citizens lack the 'know how' and organisational capacity to be present throughout the process and provide input.

Veto power, network management and under privileged interests

So still, less powerful actors may influence decisionmaking. They can use their veto-power and their ability to use resources for blocking decisionmaking and thus create stagnation or blockade. Since stagnation and blockade result in extra costs - at the very least - more powerful actors need to consider their less powerful colleagues. In order to encourage actors not to use their veto power, some degree of convergence of perceptions must be achieved. This is also an important reason for the necessity of process management. Furthermore, and certainly as important, this also leads to the consideration of information and interests of other actors to enhance the quality and support of policy initiatives. The starting point of process management is to enhance the learning capability of policy processes by including information and interests of various actors so that more complete policy initiatives can be developed. From a network approach, the involvement of actors is not only recommended for normative reasons, but also for reasons of effectiveness and efficiency. Expertise and knowledge for handling (policy) problems is not available in one place only and thus a confrontation of policy initiatives with information and interests of other actors is necessary. Power differences influence the way in which this process evolves. As long as actors hold veto power, they have influence.

A more serious problem occurs when actors have no veto-power and/or are excluded from

interaction by other parties. This can happen when interaction patterns between actors result in a certain degree of network insularity (Rhodes, 1988; Laumann and Knoke, 1987). Outsiders can only access the network if they familiarise themselves with the rules of behaviour and the language of the network (Klijn, 1996). In the development of theory in network management, substantial attention is given to this aspect of networks and to the negative policy effects this may have for the environment. When formulating prescriptions, opportunities for dealing with the limitations of this closed nature are sought in network constitution and in the use of process norms. These will be clarified in the next section.

5. Success and Failure of Policy: The Search for evaluation criteria

The network approach has consequences for the way in which success and failure are assessed in policy analysis. The evaluation criteria that have been proposed to judge outcomes and success of policy processes in networks have been criticised for being too vague and not taking into account sufficiently the goals of public actors (Marin and Mayntz 1991, Pröpper 1996). If however the starting point is that various actors with different objectives are involved, it is unlikely that the process and outcome can be evaluated in terms of the objectives of one actor, even if this is a public actor. This type of top-down approach does not correspond with the network approach. Instead, criteria are needed which consider the multi-actor, dynamic character of interaction in networks.

The Impossibility of a Unilateral Substantive Criterion

In classic top-down approaches, success and failure of policy processes is measured in terms of goal effectiveness of a public actor. The justification for this norm lies in the notion that this actor represents the general interest and is the central steering actor in policy processes. We argue that this yardstick is not appropriate in the network approach for a number of reasons.

First, there is the problem of the 'classic goal achievement method', namely the accurate determination of the formulated objective. Actors in networks are relatively autonomous and there is no central, co-ordinating actor. Each actor has his own objectives so it is unclear whose objective should serve as the yardstick. The pragmatic choice for the public actor's objective is not helpful. Frequently, more public actors are involved in decisionmaking processes so that even 'public interest' is hard to determine. The solution of defining general interest in terms of elected political representation is based on an unrealistic and naive assumption about the accumulation of preferences of citizens that have long since been falsified by theory and research. A call upon the 'general interest' is increasingly impossible in a society that continues to fragment (see next section).

The problem of finding the right evaluation criterion is not solved by using an intersubjectively achieved formulation of a societal problem or objectives as yardstick either (compare Glasbergen, 1995). It is unlikely that actors possess a common perception of the problem or objective at the beginning of a process given the large number of parties involved and their diverging interests.

There is an additional problem that makes the use of ex ante formulated objectives in the network approach impossible. In interaction processes, actors adapt their perceptions and objectives based on the responses of other parties and events in the environment. As a result, they arrive at a conclusion through a goal-seeking process. Ex ante problem formulation or objective setting as a yardstick, whether or not intersubjectively established, does not take this into account. After all, the

problem formulation and the objective(s) will change in the course of the process. If the evaluator only focuses on initial problem definitions or objectives, he ignores an important element of interaction processes – namely that the perceptions of problems and solutions are subject to constant change – and he will evaluate learning processes negatively.

A final problem with evaluating success and failure by means of a prior and intersubjectively accepted yardstick is the following: if parties do not participate in the interaction, the chances are high that their interests and preferences are not served. The question of the degree to which the final solution furthers or jeopardises their interests is not considered in the evaluation. In the network approach, the process along which a possible common problem formulation is established is critical.

Assessment of Substance: Ex Post Satisficing and Win-Win Situations

An adequate yardstick should consider the fact that various actors with diverging interests interact, that objectives are difficult to measure, that objectives shift and that the interests of those involved may be overlooked. In the network management literature, the solution is found in the ex post satisficing criterion (Teisman, 1992/1995). This means that the starting point of the assessment of policy process outcomes is based on the subjective judgements of individual actors. The idea that various actors are interviewed about their satisfaction after the conclusion of the process solves several problems. When reaching a final conclusion, various actors had to determine how the outcome has benefited them, what the outcome has cost them, and how the outcome fits in the changing environment. In this assessment, both substantive and process elements are weighted, which is something that the researcher can not possibly do. Since this is a judgement in retrospect, justice is done to the development of objectives and problem formulation during the process. Learning behaviour receives the appreciation it deserves. One potential danger is that actors will, in retrospect, suggest rationalisations that mask possible loss. Comparing the subjective judgement of actors to achieved outcomes and to the interests of involved actors might alleviate this concern. Also, an assessment of learning effects should include the development of the substantive content of policy proposals. Policy proposals are better when they have been able to incorporate the various goals and desires of actors and have included or explicitly rejected criticism of earlier policy proposals. The ex post satisficing criterion solves problems of measurability, assessment, and dynamics.

What remains are problems of intersubjectivity and exclusion. The problem of intersubjectivity refers to the fact that statements of actors may diverge strongly and will not directly lead to a general assessment of success and failure of the policy process. In other words, there is a need to assess the individual judgement of actors at a higher level. For this, the win-win situation criterion is used in the network approach. When actors have succeeded in establishing an outcome that represents an improvement from the earlier situation for all or when an undesirable situation is avoided through co-operation, we speak of a win-win situation (compare the pareto-criterion, see for instance Dery, 1984). The nature of the improvement may differ for the various parties. Also a party may have actually lost, but is compensated by others. A win-win situation can be assessed by aggregating the individual ex-post judgement of actors at a more collective level. It is also conceivable that the actors involved are given the opportunity to arrive at an assessment of the process and its outcome together. Here too, statements will have to be validated in relation to objectives formulated by actors and realised outcomes.

The Necessity of Process Norms

Not all forms of co-operation are of (equal) interest to (all) parties, nor are they always desirable from a wider perspective. It is conceivable that actors, who worked together on a problem, find themselves in a groupthink-type of situation so that the interests of the outside world were insufficiently considered or not considered at all. Win-win situations may have been realised because other actors were excluded from the decisionmaking or because the costs were placed elsewhere.

It is important that interaction processes are accessible to third parties, that careful assessments are possible, and that contact is maintained with the outside world. This means that in addition to the win-win situation criterion, process criteria such as openness, carefulness, reliability, and legitimacy are included when evaluating interaction processes in networks. Also, the external effects of these processes should be included (Kickert, Klijn and Koppenjan, 1997).

Thus in the network approach, ex post judgement of actors about the process and the outcome, in combination with process criteria and attention for external effects, are used in order to determine the success or failure of policy processes. These are considered to be better indicators for success and failure than the ex ante formulated objectives of one actor.

6 Public Actors and Policy Networks

In the network approach, public actors do not play the dominant role they often are supposed to perform in other public administration perspectives. This empirical observation evokes criticism. The network approach is accused of considering government 'an actor among actors'. As a result a democratic legitimacy problem or accountability problem can emerge (Rhodes, 1997; Hirst, 1994). Sometimes critics describe networks as closed subsystems dominated by established interest groups, which hinder innovations and maximise their private interests at the cost of others. As a result the general interest is neglected and the primacy of politics is eroded (Ripley and Franklin, 1987; Marsh and Rhodes, 1992, De Bruijn and Ringeling, 1997). From this point of view it is inconceivable to present a network approach as a normative theory. Still, this is what we do when we derive evaluation criteria and prescriptions from network theory.

In this section we warn for mixing up the real world and the theoretical framework which is used to analyse, evaluate and improve it. If the real world does not fit our norms, this does not mean we can restrain from it, or that our attempts to improve it are subject to the same normative shortcomings. The fact that government is confronted with the reality of its dependency upon other actors does not imply that its position is not special. Nor does developing network strategies and strategies for network management imply that the shortcomings of existing realities are accepted and elevated to guiding principles. So, there are clearly misunderstandings about the position of government in network theory. In this section we will clarify the ideas within network theory on the role of governments as public managers in networks and the risks and potentials this has for the representation of the general interest and the primacy of politics.

The special position of government

Network theory by no means presumes that governments are like other actors. Governments have unique resources at their disposal and work to achieve unique goals. They occupy a special position, which in most cases can not be replaced by others. Resources that determine this special position include: sizeable budgets and personnel, special powers, access to mass media, a monopoly on the

use of force, and democratic legitimisation. Access to these resources provides governments with considerable power. However, they also encounter certain limitations as a function of their uniqueness (Kickert, Klijn and Koppenjan, 1997):

- The tasks of government define to a great extent its interdependence and often condemn it to interactions with particular social and administrative partners that it can not freely choose.
- In performing its duties, government is frequently not allowed to ‘goal bargain’. In this respect, it often does not have the option of carrying out tasks through negotiation.
- Governments are bound to the norms and rules they wish to impose on others: principles of good government, consideration for minorities and adversaries, guidelines of democratic regulations, et cetera. Where other actors operate with strategic ingenuity, governments are expected to show exemplary behaviour.
- Because of its public nature and the democratic monitoring, more demands are made on government’s strategic interactions. These actions are scrutinised by the watchful eye of the media.
- Government is not only expected to operate effectively and efficiently, its actions must also be legitimate: they must be ‘backed’ by politicians and political parties, but there must also be social acceptance of public policy.

So, their unique position means governments have access to special resources, but also limits their possibilities to use them in order to attain their goals in network situations.

But perhaps these empirical observations do not touch upon the core of the debate about the role of governments in networks. The debate is mainly about the normative implications of getting engaged in networks: Public actors represent the general interest and that is why they should not enter into interactions and partnerships with other societal parties. One counter-argument is that the empirical observation that they are dependent makes this normative position problematic. It simply does not help governments that have to deal with the complexities of their task environment. But we may also go more into depth regarding the question why the representation of the general interest is at odds with engaging into network processes. What does representation of the general interest mean? Does it imply that the objectives of governmental organisations are superior to those of other actors, because they are mandated by elections (i.e. the will of the people)? The political science and public administration research of the last 50 years has, however, shown that there are many problems with the aggregation of preferences of voters in governmental policies and that representing bodies function far from optimal. In concrete game situations it appears that public organisations define the general interest in a variety of ways and frequently use it to legitimise their own organisational objectives. This will have to have consequences for our appreciation of the concept of general interest. If general interest has any meaning at all, it is because it refers to the importance of criteria such as proportional representation, openness, equity, fairness, reliability, et cetera. Note that these are all criteria regarding the quality of the interaction process in stead of the content of policies or decisions. And that network management is the instrument to produce that interaction processes have these qualities. Network management is the instrument by which the quality and openness of processes can be accomplished. If the representation of the general interest is defined in this way, there is no reason to persist that entering into network-like processes is contrary to the representation of the general interest. Quite on the contrary, because it is the task of governmental organisations to pursue the general interest, they should, rather than refraining from network games, actively seek to organise and manage them.

However, there remains the criticism that the position of representative bodies will be eroded as a consequence of negotiation processes between executing public bodies and private and semi-private partners (Rhodes, 1997). Because of the non-transparent and uncontrolled processes in networks, the primacy of politics will be hollowed out. But then again, by responsible and prudent action in networks, government can help prevent processes from experiencing these shortcomings. The network approach, with ideas about process management and network constitution, seeks to contribute to the improvement of the open and democratic nature of interaction processes in policy networks.

Public Management in networks: roles for governmental organisations

While confronted with network like situation, governments may choose among the following options.

First, they may choose not to join in network games. This means that they will try to unilaterally impose their ideas and goals on other social actors. This approach is an option, but asks for a huge investment in decision and implementation activities given existing dependencies and the necessity to break the hindrance power of opponents. The risk are high: is there sufficient and stable political support for such a strategy? How sure can we be that goal attainment means effectiveness and efficiency, given the imperfect information base of the policy and the strategical behaviour of target groups addressed? And what does this mean for the relations with parties on which governments remain dependent in parallel and future arenas?

Second, governments may decide to perform their task in co-operation with other public, semi-public and private actors. Often, entering into dialogue with social organisations is considered quite legitimate and a standard operating procedure. We explicitly mention co-operation with other public actors, because it is entirely possible that various governmental organisations, in performing their tasks, discover to be dependent upon each other. But not every form of co-operation is acceptable or tolerable. For instance hierarchical supervisory relations between public actors may limit possibilities of horizontal co-operation.

Third, government can take up the role of process manager and try to facilitate interaction processes aimed at the resolution of certain problems or the realisation of projects. The fact that government is supposed to protect the public interest, safeguard democratic values and be publicly accountable for its actions frequently makes it acceptable to others as a process manager. However, it is not always possible or sensible for governmental organisations to accept such role. For instance, the Dutch ministry of Housing, Physical Planning and Environment was project leader of planning process regarding the expansion of the Dutch National Airport in the second half of the 1980s. This made it very hard for the ministry to protect environmental interest while it was supposed to perform the role of an unpartisan process manager.

Fourth, governments may choose to take up the role of network builder. Given the special resources of governments and their role as representative of the general interest, governments seem to be eminently suited for this role. But at the same time, strategies aimed at changing network features have to be realised in games themselves and need to be negotiated with other parties involved in order to result in stable network changes. These changes can not be accomplished instantly. This means that network constitution is not instrumental to the realisation of substantive government goals in concrete games that are going on (compare Hood and Jackson, 1991).

A serious danger in operating within games for governments is that these four roles are

confused. This may occur for strategic reasons, or if government is inexperienced with a new role and, in the middle of a difficult situation, reverts to old routines. Ten Heuvelhof (1993) mentions the risk of alternating between the roles of imposing and negotiation. We have already referred to the danger of pursuing a substantive objective while acting as network manager. Network constitution and process management are not necessarily compatible either. Clearly confusion of roles leads to misunderstandings and conflict among actors and can prove to be costly in terms of effectiveness and efficiency, but especially with regard to the reliability and legitimacy of government.

7 Conclusion

In this article, we have argued that the policy network approach has developed into a relatively elaborate, empirically grounded and recognisable theoretical framework. With the help of this framework policy processes can be analysed, explained and evaluated. And it offers clues on which prescriptions regarding strategies, game management and network structuring can be based.

Despite this scientific work, the network approach can hardly be considered to be widely accepted as a theory on which practitioners in the public sector base their actions. It is therefore not surprising that the descriptive and explanatory aspects of the theory until now have received more attention than its prescriptions. However, we believe that network theory will prove to be an important source of inspiration for the development of public management. The nature of tasks, with which governments in present complicated societies are confronted, will not allow for command and control reactions. Because of the ambiguity and complexity of these tasks, governments will have to learn to enter into partnerships with other parties. Network management strategies will have to become part of their standard operation procedures.

In the Netherlands for instance, this insight is widely recognised and even experiments are started to develop public policies in co-operation between politicians, civil servants, private companies, pressure groups and citizens. But at the same time there is hesitation and resistance to abandon existing routines and to give up the power to determine the content of policies unilaterally. As a result the mentioned experiments often remain marginal and half-hearted.

So, where do we go from here? We think it important that the content, conditions and implications of the network approach as a prescriptive theory for public management are further developed, tested and evaluated. In the first place this will make it possible to further elaborate network management strategies on the level of concrete techniques and supporting instruments. Until now this part of network approach has been subject of mostly conceptual and theoretical work. It now becomes time for applying these ideas in practice and for empirical testing. This new phase will open up a whole new range of practical challenges and research questions.

A second theme, which deserves attention, is that of the institutional conditions for the introduction of network management strategies. What are the institutional barriers and how can they be taken away? For instance, which positive and negative incentives for interorganisational co-operation exist within governmental organisations? And which interorganisational arrangements for mediation and arbitration are present within policy sectors at the different governmental levels? This institutional theme brings us also to the potentials of international comparative studies. Is network theory a typical product of nations with coalition governments, a strong consensual political culture and a decentralised state system? Can it be applied in unitary states with a majority system? If so, are

network management strategies universal or subject to path dependent developments?

Third, there is the question of the implications of applying network theory. Applying ideas of network management means a redefinition of traditional roles of politicians, civil servants, interest group involvement and citizen participation. We mentioned earlier the need to redefine the concept of the general interest. The same is true for ideas about primacy of politics and accountability. Does network management mean the end of politics or can politicians develop new leading roles? Does co-operation between governments and other parties result in the blurring of responsibilities, or can new arrangements and procedures be found which allow for both co-operation and accountability?

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