Five ways to make a difference: perceptions of practitioners working in urban neighborhoods

Durose, Catherine; Van Hulst, M.; Jeffares, Stephen; Escobar, O.; Agger, A.; de Graaf, L.

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Catherine Durose, PhD. is Senior Lecturer in the Institute of Local Government Studies and Director of Research in the School of Government and Society, University of Birmingham, UK. Catherine's research focuses on the politics, policies and practices of participation. Her recent book (with Liz Richardson), 'Designing Public Policy for Co-Production' (Policy Press/ University of Chicago Press) builds on a body of work in journals such as Public Administration, Political Studies and Policy & Politics.

Post: Institute of Local Government Studies, University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, B15 2TT

Email: c.durose@bham.ac.uk

Merlijn van Hulst is Associate Professor in the School of Politics and Public Administration at Tilburg University. He is interested in the role of sense-making in public organizations. Current research includes analyses of police storytelling, the work of exemplary practitioners in neighborhood governance, and framing in policy and politics. He has published in a broad range of journals, including The British Journal of Criminology; Planning Theory and The American Review of Public Administration.

Post: Tilburg University, Tilburg School of Politics and Public Administration, PO Box 90153, 5000 LE Tilburg, The Netherlands

Email: m.j.vanhulst@uvt.nl

Stephen Jeffares, PhD. is Lecturer in Public Policy Analysis at the Institute of Local Government Studies, University of Birmingham, UK. He is also President of the International Society for the Scientific Study of Subjectivity, the academic society of Q-methodologists. Stephen's work explores the challenges and opportunities of researching public policy in an era of social media and big data. His books include Interpreting Hashtag Politics (Palgrave, Macmillan 2014).

Post: Institute of Local Government Studies, University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, B15 2TT

Email: s.r.jeffares@bham.ac.uk

Oliver Escobar PhD. is Lecturer in Public Policy at the University of Edinburgh, Co-Director of What Works Scotland and convenes the Citizen Participation Network at the Academy of Government. Oliver's work focuses on participatory governance, deliberative democracy and collaborative policy-making. He has published in journals such as Science and Public Policy, the Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis, and Public Library of Science One, as well as the open access e-book 'Public Dialogue and Deliberation'.

Post: School of Social and Political Science, 22 George Square, Edinburgh, EH8 9LD.

Email: oliver.escobar@ed.ac.uk

Annika Agger, PhD is Associate Professor at the Roskilde School of Governance, Roskilde University, Denmark. She is currently involved in research projects on new forms of local democracy and public deliberations in the context of urban and environmental planning. She

has written articles and contributions to books on how to create institutional design for participation as well as on how to evaluate citizen participation projects.

Post: Institute for Society & Globalisation, Roskilde University, Universitetsvej 1, 40000 Roskilde Universitet, Denmark.

Email: aagger@ruc.dk

Laurens de Graaf, PhD. is Assistant Professor and member of the Executive Board at the Tilburg School of Politics and Public Administration, Tilburg University, the Netherlands. His research focuses on the functioning of local democracy. Within this theme, he has conducted extensive research on citizen participation, social innovation, exemplary practitioners, do-democracy and local referendums.

Post: Tilburg University, Tilburg School of Politics and Public Administration, PO Box 90153, 5000 LE Tilburg, The Netherlands

Email: L.J.deGraaf@Tilburguniversity.edu

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Five Ways to Make a Difference: Perceptions of Practitioners Working in Urban Neighborhoods

Abstract

This article responds to and develops the fragmented literature exploring intermediation in public administration and urban governance. It uses Q-methodology to provide a systematic comparative empirical analysis of practitioners perceived as making a difference in urban neighborhoods. Through our analysis, we identify and compare an original set of five profiles of practitioners: *Enduring, Struggling, Facilitating, Organizing* and *Trailblazing*. Our research challenges and advances the existing literature by emphasizing the multiplicity, complexity and hybridity, rather than singularity, of those individuals perceived as making a difference, arguing that different practitioners make a difference in different ways. We set out a research agenda, overlooked in current theorization, focusing on the relationships and transitions between the five profiles and the conditions that inform them, opening up new avenues for understanding and supporting practice.

Keywords: neighborhood, practitioner, community, intermediaries, Q-methodology

Five Ways to Make a Difference: Perceptions of Practitioners Working in Urban Neighborhoods

Promoting social action and active citizenship is now shaping the agendas and rhetoric of governments internationally (OECD 2009), as they seek to harness the perceived agency, resources and solidarity of communities to address a plethora of social and public administration concerns (Taylor 2003). This objective is pursued through interactive forms of governance that facilitate the intermediation between public institutions and their wider environment (Osborne 2010, Torfing et al. 2012). The urban neighborhood has emerged as a significant spatial anchor for intermediation, due to its role as a site for government intervention, but also its (re)-emergence as a sphere for governance and space for local action (Smith et al. 2007). This article contributes to an emergent, lively, inter-disciplinary and international literature exploring the qualities and practices of intermediaries working in urban neighborhoods.

A proliferation of types and labels of variably transparent etymology are used to describe such individuals. These range from those recognizable to practitioners, i.e. *community organizer* and *community leader*, to more academic renderings, i.e. *everyday maker* (Bang and Sorensen 1999, Li and Marsh 2008), *deliberative practitioner* (Forester 1999), *social entrepreneur* (Waddock and Post 1991, Korosec and Berman 2006) and *civic entrepreneur* (Durose 2011). While these terms resonate beyond the site-specific research from which they were developed, attempts at comparative analysis have thus far been restricted to secondary reviews of characteristics (van Hulst et al. 2011) and empirical analysis has been limited to investigation within single neighborhoods (van de Wijdeven and Hendriks 2009). In this article, we refine and contribute to this important but fragmented literature by offering an

original set of five profiles of practitioners who are perceived as making a difference in urban neighborhoods.

While our study is grounded in the literature, it does not assume or seek to fix the types of practitioner *a priori*. Following researchers like Lipsky (1980) and Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003), our intention is to discover practitioners' positioning, activities and understandings. We use a sensitizing concept to provide a point of departure (Glaser 1978) and a 'general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances', but avoid 'prescriptions of what to see' (Blumer 1969, 147-148). Our sensitizing concept, 'neighborhood practitioners who are making a difference', is familiar without having a clearly defined or shared meaning. It could refer to different individuals who work in urban neighborhoods. Their work may involve employment in public administration or in the delivery of public services, for example as front-line workers engaging daily with local communities and citizens; or employment in a non-profit, community or voluntary sector organization based in the neighborhood; they may be elected politicians working within their constituency; or they may be from, or represent, civil society, for example as community leaders, activists, active citizens or residents. Making a difference might be achieved by, for example, bringing different organizations and communities together, organizing a community to take action or developing projects to improve a neighborhood.

Q-methodology has been increasingly applied in the study of administrative roles and practice (Selden et al. 1999, Brewer et al. 2000, de Graaf 2010). Our research uses Q-methodology to retain qualitative interpretation within a systematic and comparative quantitative analysis of subjectivity (Stephenson 1953). et al. Our research is composed of a Q-methodology study in four European countries: the Netherlands, Denmark, England and

Scotland. This cross-national study was designed on a 'most similar' basis (Seawright and Gerring 2008), looking across developed democracies that have been the site of extensive policy experimentation and intervention in urban neighborhoods. The study involved 147 'key informants' (Liebow 1967, Chazdon and Lott 2010) drawn from our existing research networks built through our prior work with practitioners working in urban neighborhoods. These key informants were asked to identify and then characterize an individual whom they felt made a difference in an urban neighborhood. Taking a Q-methodology approach allowed us to systematically analyze, refine and compare these perceptions in order to generate original profiles of neighborhood practitioners who are perceived to be making a difference. The profiles were refined through qualitative comments and interviews with those key respondents whose identified individual most closely corresponded with each profile.

Our research addresses three key weaknesses in the existing literature. First, by offering systematic comparison, we overcome the limitations of localized and site-specific theorizing. Second, in focusing on those practitioners who make a difference, we retain the recognition of the importance of agency; but we are able to move from the heroism of single types of practitioners (Meijer 2014) – for example, William's 'competent boundary spanner' (2002) Hendriks and Tops' 'everyday fixer' (2005) – to recognize the crucial contribution of different types of practitioners in making a difference in the urban neighborhood. Third, we avoid the rigidity of fixed types and instead offer fluid profiles that are better able to reflect evolving modes of practice. We also set out a research agenda that considers how different practitioners may relate to each other and how they are shaped by, and indeed shape, their neighborhood context. In sum, we build on existing literature, address its limitations, advance understanding and generate a new research agenda.

Our key contribution is to offer an analysis that brings into view a coherent set of practitioner profiles, to systematically compare these profiles, identifying points of difference, similarity and overlap, and to demonstrate that, within urban neighborhoods, different practitioners are able to make a difference in different ways. In doing so, we are able to cut across singular role descriptions and labels found in existing research and to incorporate the insights of those with first-hand knowledge and understanding to not only offer a refinement of previous research, but to generate new theory.

The article is divided into four sections. First, we provide an analysis of the existing relevant research. Second, we provide detail and reflection on our use of Q-methodology, specifically our research design, data collection and data analysis. In the third section, we provide a narrative of our findings, identifying five unique profiles of neighborhood practitioners who make a difference: Enduring, Struggling, Facilitating, Organizing and Trailblazing. We then compare across the profiles and consider the implications for public administration. We conclude by setting out an agenda for future research.

Practitioners in the public sphere

This article is informed by the 'turn to practice' in public administration research (Wagenaar 2004; Freeman et al. 2011), which draws our attention to individual practitioners, and how they interpret, value and conduct their work. At the same time, it suggests that the agency of practitioners in urban neighborhoods should be understood as embedded in that context (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). Reflecting this turn, we organize this section around four analytic categories: the aims, commitments, activities and resources associated with practitioners in urban neighborhoods in the existing literature.

The aims of neighborhood practitioners may vary significantly. For example, the 'everyday maker' focuses on what is pragmatically attainable in the local environment (Bang and Sorensen 1999). Others, from a community organizing perspective, would aim for local action to build power and create wider change (Alinsky 1989). These aims may be influenced by the positioning of the practitioner in relation to the formal institutions of public administration, but also the extent to which they are informed, influenced and disciplined by those in the neighborhood (Lowndes and Chapman 2014). Practitioners are also described through the commitment to their work, which is often perceived as more than 'just a job' (van Hulst et al. 2012) and pledging to 'go the extra mile' (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003). The sustainability and risk of these commitments are also the focus of research (Escobar 2014).

These aims and commitments shape the daily activities of practitioners in the neighborhood. These activities may be difficult to describe in the public administration literature's language of profession and bureaucracy. Some scholars see these activities as 'performances' which may be 'spontaneous (a practice made up to deal with a tricky situation or new challenge) or rehearsed (developed through dialogue with others or perhaps shaped by a director), may offer new interpretations and translations, or may abandon the script altogether' (Newman 2013, 517). This perspective recognizes that 'in order to create something new or different', practitioners need to 'face in multiple directions' and 'negotiate between different rationales and commitments' (2013, 525). Similarly, Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2012) talk about 'pragmatic improvisation', which refers to the 'reinvent[ion]' of practice, that constantly changes 'in respect of each new client, each new situation and each new set of circumstances' (Freeman et al. 2011, 129). In parallel, others have used the language of entrepreneurialism ((Waddock and Post 1991, Korosec and Berman 2006, Durose, 2011, van Hulst et al. 2012)

to describe these activities; or that of ‘boundary spanning’, generating links between public organizations and with the wider environment (Williams 2002, Escobar 2014). Williams describes such practitioners as a ‘jack of all trades’ (2002, 119) suggesting that a broad and flexible repertoire of skills is required to support these activities. Different characterizations cite skills of varying tangibility ranging from listening empathically, mediating conflict and relationship building (Forester 1989) to inspiring, motivating and mobilizing people to act together (Alinsky 1989).

As suggested, the crucial resource for neighborhood practitioners is their ability to forge and sustain interpersonal networks (William 2002). While some accounts give emphasis to ‘bonded’ networks based on shared experiences or values, others focus on credibility within ‘bridging’ networks or more diverse alliances (Putnam 2000). Such networks can be basis for building political resources (Alinsky 1989) or making visible hidden or neglected assets within communities (Kretzmann and MacKnight 1993). While these ‘bonding’ and ‘bridging’ networks may be focused within a neighborhood, ‘linking’ networks provide connections beyond the neighborhood, for example to external resources which can then be leveraged in the neighborhood (Agger and Jensen 2015). These different forms of networks all share a focus on generating what Hendriks and Tops have referred to as ‘vital coalitions’ to ‘get things done and keep things going around the neighborhood’ (2005, 487). To do this successfully, neighborhood practitioners are often seen to be resourced by their ‘street’ (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2012) and ‘political’ (Kingdon 1995) ‘smarts’; also termed as their ‘local knowledge’, a ‘kind of non-verbal knowing that evolves from seeing, interacting with someone (or some place or something) overtime’ reflecting ‘very mundane yet expert understanding from lived experience’ (Yanow 2004, S12).

These four analytical categories of aims, commitments, activities and resources informed our research design, which focused on generating a systematic and comparative analysis of how these different qualities may be configured in making a difference in urban neighborhoods.

Research design

Public administration research has increasingly applied Q-methodology as a rigorous means of studying the subjective perceptions of public actors and how they view an aspect of their practice (Brewer et al. 1999, De Graaf 2010, Jeffares and Skelcher 2011). Unlike many qualitative approaches to discerning people's perceptions of their world, Q standardizes data collection to allow for the incorporation of a quantitative stage of correlation and factor analysis (McKeown and Thomas 2013). Unlike mainstream survey methods, Q is most commonly administered as part of a qualitative interview where respondents answer questions resulting from a Q-sort. Q-sorting requires respondents to prioritize a set of statements about the topic under investigation. Q-sorting is an intensive process and one that requires informants to thoroughly engage with the material as they sort. The Q-sort produces a reflection of the informant's view of the topic and its standardized form allows for systematic statistical comparison. The aim of the analysis is to identify a discrete set of composite viewpoints or profiles, usually between two and seven in number, informed by those Q-sorts that are highly correlated with one another or bear a 'family resemblance' (Brown 1980, 34).

Although Q is a novel approach to research for many, its origins date back to the work of William Stephenson (1935, 1953). The process for conducting a standard Q-study is now widely agreed (Watts and Stenner 2012). McKeown and Thomas (2013) offer a framework, a five-step sequence for Q-methodological studies. Briefly: Step 1 sees the sampling of

statements surrounding an issue, known as a Q-sample. Step 2 samples key informants of a relevant population. During Step 3, key informants express their subjectivity through the operational medium of a Q-sort, a rank ordering of the Q-sample according to a clear condition of instruction, often most characteristic to most uncharacteristic from their point of view. Analysis during Step 4 consists of inter-correlating the Q sorts and factor analyzing them based on a formula set down by Stephenson (1935). Factor scores are calculated to produce a parsimonious set of factors resembling composite Q sorts. Step 5, these composite Q sorts are then interpreted focusing primarily on distilling the core meaning of each factor, to examine patterns in context (McKeown and Thomas 2013). We use this five-step framework to describe our research design.

Step 1: Development of a Q sample

The Q sample is drawn from the concourse of debate surrounding a topic (Stephenson 1972) in order to represent the diversity of discussion. Examples of actors expressing discrete statements of opinion about the topic in question can be collected in different ways, including purposive interviews, focus groups and traditional or social media. We drew from two sources: our previous empirical research in this area and the academic literature discussed. While hundreds of statements may be collected, there is a limit to how many a key informant can reliably sort. Therefore researchers are required to narrow their sample down to a manageable number while preserving the diversity of the sample (Fisher 1960).

Although some studies may warrant a deductive sample based on existing theory, in most cases, including ours, an inductive design generated from the themes in the statements is preferable. The broadly interpretive epistemology of Q-methodology (Jeffares 2014) allows us to take an abductive approach to this research (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012), drawing

on both existing theory and literature together with our own experience and prior research. The research team worked iteratively with some 230 candidate statements. After extensive piloting, we agreed on a Q-set of 46 statements. While some Q-studies will use a range of different kinds of statements including evaluative, definitional and normative (Dryzek and Berejikian 1993) our statements offer 46 'characteristics' of people who make a difference (see Appendix 1). We edited the statements to give them a standard prefix: "the person I have in mind…" followed by the statement, for example "finds it easy to bend the rules." In keeping with previous multi-country Q-studies (Robyn 2004), we took the decision to develop the statements in English and translate the final set into Danish and Dutch.

Step 2: Person Sample

The purpose of Q is to explore and characterize the diversity of attitudes in a given population rather than ascertain the 'numerical incidence' or 'demographic correlates of such opinions' (McKeown and Thomas 2013, 32). Most Q-studies find samples of between 25 and 40 sufficient (Watts and Stenner 2012). We therefore sought to sample this number in each of our four different country contexts - England, Scotland, Denmark and the Netherlands – and aimed at generating a total sample of 100 to 160 people. Drawing on existing research networks helped us to secure a good response rate with an intensive method. Of the 300 key informants identified from our existing research networks, just under half, 147 completed an online Q-sort. To address concerns of internal validity, conscious efforts were made to ensure variability of the person sample (McKeown and Thomas 2013). We acknowledge that to determine broader external validity and understand who and what proportion of the wider population holds such views would require supplementary research (Baker et al. 2010).

We invited key informants to Q-sort our statements. Key informants are those individuals who have first-hand knowledge, expertise and understanding of a neighborhoods or locality (Liebow 1967, Chazdon and Lott 2010). The key informants in this study were drawn from our existing research networks built through our prior work with and concerning practitioners working in urban neighborhoods. Our key informants had one of the following three roles or a combination thereof: employee of a public administration or non-profit sector organization; an activist or active citizen; or elected local representative. Table 1 shows the distribution of key informants by country across these roles.

Table 1 – Key informants completing the Q sort by country and role(s) – insert here

Of the 300 key informants identified from our existing research networks, just under half, 147 completed an online Q-sort.

Step 3: Q sorting

The Q-sort is essentially a modified rank ordering procedure, where respondents are given a single clear condition of instruction; most typically to order statements according to whether they are most or least characteristic of their point of view. While Q is often administered as part of a face-to-face interview, with widespread internet use and where respondents are geographically dispersed, Q is increasingly administered online (Reber et al. 2000; Jeffares 2014). However it is administered, the Q-sort involves the same process. First the respondent is presented with the Q-sample and asked to pre-sort the statements into three groups: ‘agree’, ‘disagree’ and, ‘neutral’, where they have no real reaction to a statement. The process of pre-sorting familiarizes the key informant with the statements, which they are then invited to disperse into a defined response grid. As Appendix 2 shows, this grid resembles an upturned

pyramid, the shape of which is dictated by the size of the Q-sample. For our study, statements were ranked across a 9-point scale, with the two cards on the extreme right representing statements that the key informant most strongly agreed with.

Every sort will be unique to the person sorting. The grid is organized on a relative scale requiring respondents to prioritize between statements on offer. How a respondent sorts hinges on a single condition of instruction. It is therefore vital that every person sorting receives the same instruction. In our study, the condition of instruction was: ‘Think of a particular person who you think has really made a difference in a neighborhood you know, sort the following statements into order of how much you agree that the statement describes the person you are thinking of". As the sort was conducted online, to ensure understanding of their research and the task involved, respondents were guided through a brief presentation explaining the aims of the research, prompting reflection about a particular person who makes a difference, before being led to the Q sort. The Q sort was hosted on the software program POETQ (Dickinson et al. 2014) which was adapted for this study. Key informants spent an average of 26 minutes undertaking the Q-sort, including providing short 50 to 100 word responses to the open questions of why they chose the two most and least characteristic statements. In addition, key informants provided some basic demographic information about the person they had in mind. This information is compiled in Table 2.

Table 2: Demographic information from key informants on the person they had in mind – insert here

Key informants were given the choice to remain anonymous or to confidentially provide contact details for the purpose of follow-up interviews and dissemination of findings from the research. To complement the Q sort, we conducted purposive post-sort interviews with the five 'exemplar' key informants whose sort loaded heaviest on the extracted factors. These interviews generated information 'helpful to the understanding and interpreting of results', such as 'meanings and reasons for assigning items' (McKeown and Thomas 2013, 29). The interviews re-visited and discussed the key informant's Q-sort and helped to develop our understanding of the person they had in mind. Interviews were carried out either face-to-face or over the telephone in April and May 2014. Each interview lasted between 40 and 60 minutes and was recorded and transcribed.

Step 4: Analysis

The analysis of Q-sorts follows the original formulation devised by Stephenson (1935) in which the Q-sorts are compared pairwise to produce a bivariate NxN correlation matrix. Centroid factors are then extracted and the degree to which participants are associated with each factor is indicated by the magnitude of factor loadings, this allows for the production of factor arrays. These factor arrays resemble composite Q-sorts of how each factor would perform the Q-sort under the same conditions. We used one of the dedicated software packages, PQmethod (Schmolck and Atkinson 2011) to produce a 147x147 correlation matrix. Five centroid factors were extracted and rotated using Varimax to maximize the number of unique factor loadings. A significant loading on the sort is calculated based on the number of statements in the Q sample (Brown 1980). With 70 of our 147 sorts loading on one of five factors, a significant loading was judged to be 0.38 at $P<0.01$. Significant sorts informed the formation of factor arrays (Brown 1980). A sixth factor was considered but rejected as not

enough participants loaded to allow for a viewpoint to be interpreted. Examples of loadings are reproduced in Table 3.

Step 5: Interpretation

The final step in the process is to interpret the five factor arrays. Each factor was informed by the loading of between 4 and 22 Q-sorts, each unique but sharing a family resemblance. The interpretation of factors starts by focusing on the characteristic statements (those at the extreme ends of the array) and also distinguishing statements (statements placed uniquely). The analysis does not depend on the single placing of a particular statement but evaluates the factor somewhat more holistically (McKeown and Thomas 2013). The interpretation of factors was enhanced through the qualitative data provided by the exemplar key informants, both the Q-sort open questions and the post-sort interviews.

Table 3. Examples of persons loading on five factors – insert here

Results

From our data, we constructed five profiles of neighborhood practitioners who are perceived to make a difference, which we will now consider in turn. The labelling of each profile reflects the research team's interpretation of the data collected, the factor arrays together with positive and negative characterizing statements and the qualitative data produced by exemplar key informants in the open questions included in their Q-sort and post-sort interviews.

Profile 1: Enduring

This profile describes locally-rooted, resourceful '*people persons*'. These individuals often live in the neighborhood and have made a long-term commitment to it. The profile reflects the positive characterizing statement, 'the person I have in mind lives in the neighborhood' (statement 7, see Appendix 1) and the suggestion of an exemplar key informant who commented that the person they had in mind was *'in for the long haul'*. The main domain of concern for this profile is the neighborhood and they do not necessarily connect what they do to struggles or movements which exist beyond the local. Rather they understand their activities in the neighborhood as a way of building a place for themselves, their families and communities. In an interview, an exemplar key informant for this profile encapsulated the motivation and rootedness of these individuals: *'it came out of concern of living there, really. If you've lived somewhere all your life, you can see changes, don't you? Good or bad'.*

These individuals are viewed as typically describing themselves as 'volunteers' rather than activists. Reflecting this positioning, this profile was negatively characterized by the statement (3), 'sees their work as political'. They often operate without formal resources. In the Q-sort open questions, one key informant commented: '*She has no direct funding and no practical resources. She is semi-retired and donates her own time and expertise'.* But these individuals are resourceful, using their local visibility, reputation, integrity and local knowledge to build trust and relationships locally over time, which they leverage to effect change. The way these individuals make a difference is reflected in the positive characterizing statement (23), 'the person I have in mind encourages people to act together'. They bring a sense of pragmatism to what they do and take an incremental approach rooted in what they already do and know. For them, it is about *enduring*.

Profile 2: Struggling

These individuals are viewed as being fueled by an indefatigable commitment to a local cause, as reflected in the positive characterizing statement (36) 'doesn't give up, even if they may not "win"'. They are often based in the neighborhood, well-known and networked with substantial local knowledge. An exemplar key informant for this profile reflects in an interview, *'they become spokespeople for the community, [they've] got an intuitive sense of [how] their community works …how they be able to make things work*'.

This profile takes a relentless hands-on approach, being positively characterized as a '"less talk, more action" kind of person' (statement 31). But, they are not necessarily ready or able to compromise in order to achieve their goals, as suggested by the negative characterization with the statements, 'listens more than they talk' (30) and 'tries to put themselves in other people's shoes' (43). In the Q-sort open questions, a key informant describes the person they had in mind, *'She has a view about how things should be done and so long as you agree with her, that's fine. If you disagree it makes no difference. She does it anyway'.* Indeed, they do not seek to build alliances or bridge divides, but only collaborate with those who share their convictions and goals. This profile is positively characterized by the statement 'can be annoying' (38), as reinforced by the interviewed exemplar, who said the person they had in mind *'can rub people the wrong way … they are not trying to be everyone's pal'*. This approach may suggest why this profile is negatively characterized by the statement 'has money or financial backing' (14).

The interviewed exemplar also reinforced the sense that this profile reflects those who see themselves as local activists, but who rarely connect their own local struggle with broader social and political issues. The approach reflected by this profile is negatively characterized

by the statement, ‘is able to step back and reflect’ (34). As such, as the exemplar interviewee reflected, they are more likely *‘to hit a brick wall’* and may ‘*more readily’* experience *‘burnout’*. Making a difference for them is achieved through campaigning to advance their local cause, accomplishing change by *struggling*.

Profile 3: Facilitating

These individuals are perceived to have an ability to influence and enable people to act together, as reflected in this profile being positively characterized by the statements, ‘brings people together and creates networks’ (11), ‘encourages people to act together’ (23) and ‘can influence and inspire others’ (32). Their professional experience and skills in facilitation and mediation help them to make a difference, despite perhaps not living in the neighborhood or being ‘well-known locally’ (statement 8). While they can often draw on financial, political and organizational support, they depend considerably on their capacity to enthuse and innovate. They have the rare ability to adapt quickly to a particular context, motivate and mobilize people, facilitate difficult discussions and improvise skillfully. In the Q-sort open question, one key informant described the person they had mind as, ‘*not satisfied with the traditional perceptions of what is possible to accomplish and what is not. That is why he is so innovative’*; they continued, *‘This person is creative and is able to convince others’.* The ability to facilitate difficult conversations is encapsulated in this quote from an interview with an exemplar key informant: *‘She has the quality to subtly name tricky issues. She does that in a sensitive way, she is not avoiding it’.*

These individuals are dexterous not only at connecting people but at connecting *with* people. This skill is encapsulated in one of the responses to the Q-sort open question: *‘He is really good at meeting people where they are… and good at talking to them… where they feel*

confident'. Another of the key informants for this profile emphasizes this competence, in their response to the Q-sort open questions: *'He has knowledge of people and organizations and is able to see connections and make connections'.* Although they do not see their work as political - in the sense of connecting to broader ideals or causes - they are adept at operating in political environments. An exemplar key informant clarifies in an interview, *'she knows how to use political signals. She is politically sensitive'.* They are pragmatic and focused on the task at hand, often bringing people together across organizational and community boundaries. Their role in collective action is *facilitating.*

Profile 4: Organizing

These people are perceived as neighborhood activists who see their work as connected to, and informed by, their broader normative commitment to social change. This profile is positively characterized by the statements, 'wants a fairer society' (1), 'thinks they can help change society' and 'can influence and inspire others' (32). Further positive characterization through the statements, 'helps others to make sense of their own situation' (5);'brings people together and creates networks' (11); and 'encourages people to act together' (23) suggests that they possess a profound belief that – as one exemplar in their open Q-sort question asserts - *'everyone has the potential to change society'*. They work to influence and mobilize people to effect social change by encouraging them to make sense of their own situation and take action based on their own experience. As an exemplar key informant for this profile suggested during the interview, they *'assess for themselves how things are being done now, identifying for themselves what the barriers are and… what would reduce those barriers'*.

Insofar they are motivated by social change; they see their work as political. But this profile is negatively characterized by 'access to people in power' (12); 'money or financial backing'

(14) and ‘political support’ (15). Instead, they generate different resources by building dialogue and relationships in order to mobilize existing assets within the neighborhood, for example, local knowledge and reciprocity. Given this reliance on informal assets, they are positively characterized by being perceived as able to find ‘smart ways to bend the rules’ (22) and ‘challenge boundaries’ (29). Therefore, they are mostly operating outside of, and indeed presenting a challenge to, as an exemplar key informant put it during the interview, *‘those in power or those [whose] practice might be threatened’*.

These individuals are negatively characterized by having ‘a lot in common with the communities they work with’ (42) and may come from a different social, economic or educational background. Moreover, they are not from, or necessarily based in, the neighborhood where they operate. Our exemplar key informant clarifies in an interview: *‘This notion …“Oh, you must become one with the ‘natives’ and that’s the only way to build trust…” I think it’s a false belief… you can facilitate change in a way that isn’t mired in all that baggage’.* They are, therefore, idealists with a strong faith in the power of *organizing*.

Profile 5: Trailblazing

These individuals are perceived to be problem-solvers who apply professional skills to achieve tangible local results believing, as noted by a key informant in the Q-sort open question, ‘*you can change things’*. They are perceived as ‘*real entrepreneurs’*, creating opportunities for progress and generating practical solutions by matching together whatever resources are at hand. As one key informant suggests in her response to the Q-sort open question, *‘if the existing rules or options are inadequate he aims at changing them and insists on finding new… solutions’.* Consequently, they are comfortable with pushing the boundaries in their search for innovative ways and opportunities to get things done. They are positively

characterized by ‘making a long-term commitment to stay in the neighborhood’ (17) as they believe it can make a difference.

Being pragmatic and results-driven, they seek to build strategic, if unlikely, alliances with people and networks that can support their goals. They are often capable of mobilizing financial, political or organizational support, but they can also draw on their credibility with different local groups to mobilize local networks to support their cause. One exemplar key informant in their Q-sort adds to this, describing the person they have in mind, *‘He does not seek those in high places in order to create support for his ideas or projects. He only does it when it makes sense. He can collaborate with all kinds of people e.g. the mayor or the homeless person on the street. It is the interest of the neighborhood area and the respect for the local people that is on his mind’.* This impetus to create visible projects locally can at times cause resistance higher up in the hierarchy, as an exemplar key informant for this profile noted during the interview: ‘*He got all sorts of partners involved. His superiors backed out at the last moment. This really frustrated him. He has organized a lot, involved many people. He was seen as a threat!’*

These individuals are dedicated to making a difference and they are positively characterized by the statement that they see ‘the role as more than a job’ (6). But this does not mean that they are uncompromising, they are negatively characterized by the statement that the person in mind ‘manipulates others to achieve their purposes’ (25). Instead, they are guided by a pragmatic sense of what is, as key informants described in their Q-sort open questions, *‘in the interest of the neighborhood*’ and by ‘*respect for the local people’.* As another key informant noted, *‘He practices what he preaches – his performance is based on professional knowledge and practical experience- that is why he is respected’.* This emphasis on building credibility

in order to construct practical solutions paves the way for innovative *trailblazing* – opening-up unforeseen pathways to collaborative problem-solving.

Discussion

We have set out an original set of five profiles of practitioners who are perceived as making a difference in urban neighborhoods. Table 4 demonstrates the distinctiveness, similarity and overlap of the profiles using the four analytical categories set out earlier. We now turn to comparing across these profiles and then considering their implications for public administration.

Table 4. Key characteristics of neighborhood practitioners who are perceived to make a difference insert here

Comparing the aims and commitments of the different profiles, highlights the nuance in their normative underpinning. *Enduring* is characterized by long-standing commitment to place, articulated through an incremental and pragmatic approach to improve local life, while *Struggling* features an unwavering commitment to a local cause, manifested through sustained and uncompromising activism, which may explicitly present a challenge to public institutions. Although *Trailblazing* can also be locally rooted, its main commitment is to results-driven approaches to change. *Facilitating* and *Organizing* present the starkest contrast here, with the former emphasizing the quality and effectiveness of process over broader political commitments, and the latter being primarily driven by such commitments.

Organizing, like *Facilitating*, does not rely on local-rootedness. Instead, these neighborhood practitioners are able to make a difference partly because they come from outside the

neighborhood. *Facilitating* moves away from the inherent contestation of *Struggling* and *Organizing* towards deliberation, conflict resolution and consensus-building. Both *Facilitating* and *Trailblazing* evoke the sense of forging strategic coalitions and galvanizing support within and beyond the neighborhood. For *Trailblazing*, however, building these networks and alliances is not an end in itself, but provide vital resources which can be leveraged in the neighborhood.

In terms of activities, *Facilitating* and *Trailblazing* share 'an entrepreneurial way of doing', but their approach differs. *Facilitating* foregrounds process work, addressing uncertainties as they emerge whereas *Trailblazing* foregrounds the more anticipatory sense of looking in different directions to create synergies that may solve problems. In contrast, *Enduring* and *Struggling* are more about persistence than entrepreneurialism – albeit that persistence materializes as sustained volunteering in the former and dogged campaigning in the latter. *Organizing* has a similar element of persistence but demonstrated through the use of established tactics and approaches.

Networks are central to all the profiles, but again we find them differently constituted. *Struggling* focuses on building bonded networks which bring together like-minded people. Over time, *Enduring* and *Organizing* are able to build bridging networks which forge alliances amongst diverse groups within the local community. *Facilitating* and *Trailblazing* build wide-ranging and strategic linking networks which span communities and organizations within the neighborhood and beyond. To accomplish this, *Facilitating* and *Trailblazing* share an impetus for breaking conventions and blurring boundaries in order to, respectively, foster innovative processes and find unforeseen solutions.

Although all profiles are resourceful, the nature of their networks affects the resources which may be leveraged. *Enduring* and *Struggling* rely heavily on 'local knowledge' stemming from their embeddedness in one particular neighborhood, while the others may only develop such resources over a longer period of time. *Facilitating* and *Trailblazing* are able to leverage external resources by, in the case of *Facilitating* relying on 'political smarts' that enables them to work through formal routes, while *Trailblazing* may combine this political know-how with 'street smarts', their understanding of civil society. With a different emphasis, *Organizing* relies on asset-based approaches that mobilize people to expand their existing capacities and civic commitments.

The profiles resonate with, advance and cut across research on these roles in the sub-disciplines or related fields of public administration, including public management (Williams 2002), planning (Forester 1999), governance (Bang and Sorensen 1999), local government studies (Hendriks and Tops 2005) and community development (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993, Alinsky 1989). Yet, the findings present both a challenge and opportunity for public administration. The strategic challenge is to ensure that neighborhood interventions and approaches to engagement are sufficiently open and flexible so that they can be informed shaped and resourced by the practices of individuals able to make a difference in different ways. Further, to support effective configurations of these different practices within a locality or around a particular priority while avoiding prescribing a specific approach. For those practitioners positioned at the interface between public administration and the wider environment, responding to these findings may contest their normative and perhaps homogenizing assumptions about those individuals able to make a difference in urban neighborhoods. The street-level challenge then becomes develop a more reflexive approach, better able to sustain reciprocal relationships with different individuals in the neighborhood.

Further, a more differentiated approach, which would support street-level workers in reaching out to different practitioners at different times depending on the specific priorities, needs and dynamics of the neighborhood. In rising to these challenges, public administration may be able to better harness vital resources in order generate local action and make a difference to urban neighborhoods.

Conclusion

Our article focuses on the intermediaries working the spaces of interactive governance. Advancing an original set of five profiles of practitioners who are able to make a difference in urban neighborhoods, we address the fragmentation in the existing literature. Our contribution is to offer a systematic and comparative analysis which demonstrates that within urban neighborhoods, different practitioners are able to make a difference in different ways. This analysis of the distributed, differentiated and multi-faceted means of making a difference goes beyond simply describing practitioners who are able to make a difference, to offering a set of profiles which reflect and suggest evolving modes of practice.

The use of a 'sensitizing concept' as part of our research design has the benefits of avoiding a priori or fixed interpretations thus allowing the research to remain deliberately open to being shaped by our key informants and to produce an analysis with resonance and reach. Taking such an approach may however, limit our understanding of inter-country differences and how different practitioners working in different institutional, political and cultural contexts may differently interpret or make different normative associations with 'making a difference'. Indeed, the term itself may marginalize concerns about the differential impacts and benefits of such activities on different communities and stakeholders. Reflecting on these limitations

suggests opportunities for further comparative research focusing on the work of particular (sub) groups of practitioners.

The ways we think about the role of neighborhood practitioners should not ossify them or their contribution to public administration nor the neighborhoods where they live and work. Existing theorizations overlook how such practitioners may work differently in different roles or evolve and re-configure their repertoire of practice over time. For instance, *Struggling* may eventually settle into the more pragmatic mindset of *Enduring*, but they may also begin to develop the political ethos of *Organizing*. Similarly, *Trailblazing* may move to *Organizing* as they relinquish formal support and the risk of co-option to seek social change through other forms of collective action, or alternatively they may move to *Facilitating* as a career built on process expertise. We thus ask whether and how such evolution or re-configuration of practices may occur: at particular points in the life course, in a particular context or in response to particular events, or a combination of these. As these questions suggest, further research is needed to understand how these different practices interact within a neighborhood. Such research would enable us to understand how individuals with shared practices may be able to form a vital coalition or indeed why they may fail to do so. In line with this, it would be useful to explore how institutional design and the practices identified here may interrelate. A particular form or configuration of institutions may shape, enable or constrain such practices or give room for certain practices to flourish while hampering others.

This article prepares the way for further studies to consider the configuration, co-existence, collaboration and contestation of different roles within a particular local context, and how these different roles may evolve through this interaction. Further research could consider the nature and development of this situated agency overtime, the relationships and transitions

between the five profiles, their interrelation with particular conditions, contexts and institutional designs, opening up new avenues for understanding and supporting practice.

Practitioner points

- This research develops an original set of five different ways in which practitioners can make a difference in urban neighborhoods: *enduring, struggling, facilitating, organizing* and *trailblazing*.

- By better understanding these different practices, public administration can develop ways to support and generate local action. But taking this opportunity presents a strategic challenge for public administration in ensuring that neighborhood interventions are sufficiently flexible and open to being informed and shaped by these differing approaches.

- While at the same time, challenging assumptions, fostering mutual respect and generating effective relationships between people with different ways of working and different, and perhaps conflicting, views of the neighborhood, public administration and urban governance.

- Finally, public administration needs to avoid prescribing a particular approach in urban neighborhoods and instead aim to configure these practices as appropriate to different neighborhoods or around a particular priority.

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Table 1: Key informants completing the Q sort by country and role

Role	Country				
	Denmark	England	Netherlands	Scotland	Total
Employee of public administration/ non-profit organization	16	19	12	19	66
Activist/ active citizen/ resident	0	17	8	7	32
Elected local representative	1	2	0	2	5
Mixed	8	6	7	12	33
Researcher/ student	2	0	2	2	6
Self-employed/ entrepreneur/ consultant	1	2	0	0	3
Unknown	0	1	1	0	2
Total	**28**	**47**	**30**	**42**	**147**

Table 2. **Demographic information from key informants on the person they had in mind**

Country	Denmark		England		Netherlands		Scotland				Total
Gender	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	
Role											
Employee of a public administration/ non-profit organization	5	4	10	2	7	5	7	4	29	15	44
Activist/ active citizen/ resident	2	2	15	9	6	9	10	4	30	23	57
Elected representative	1	8	2	2	0	0	1	2	4	12	16
Mixed	4	2	4	2	1	2	9	5	18	11	29
Other	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
Total	**12**	**16**	**32**	**15**	**14**	**16**	**27**	**15**	**85**	**62**	147
	28		47		30		42		147		

Table 3. Examples of persons loading on five factors

Q-sort	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5
91	**0.66**	0.11	0.17	0.04	-0.03
85	**0.65**	0.17	-0.02	0.13	-0.11
33	**0.64**	0	0.26	0.08	0.25
12	**0.63**	0	0.09	-0.08	0.18
52	-0.06	**0.73**	-0.17	-0.18	0.03
124	0.22	**0.71**	-0.02	0	-0.06
146	-0.12	**0.71**	-0.17	0.28	0.06
130	0.3	**0.67**	-0.05	0.04	0.21
13	0.18	-0.06	**0.79**	-0.04	0.13
25	0.04	-0.11	**0.79**	0.21	0.09
138	0.16	0.1	**0.75**	0.1	-0.02
71	0.21	0.07	**0.74**	-0.05	-0.25
31	-0.07	-0.24	0.18	**0.68**	0.11
56	0.26	-0.35	-0.11	**0.66**	0.06
103	0.44	-0.04	0.17	**0.65**	0.1
57	0.13	0.04	0.01	**0.65**	-0.04
1	0	0.11	0.07	0.17	**0.67**
129	0.2	0.09	0.13	0.3	**0.61**
10	0.38	-0.04	0.07	-0.03	**0.48**
127	0.27	0	0.1	0.2	**0.45**

Table 4. Key characteristics of neighborhood practitioners who are perceived to make a difference

	Profile 1: Enduring	**Profile 2: Struggling**	**Profile 3: Facilitating**	**Profile 4: Organizing**	**Profile 5: Trailblazing**
Commitment	Strong commitment to place	Uncompromising commitment to a local cause	Commitment to enabling effective participative processes	Strong commitment to wider social change	Strong commitment to a results-driven approach
Aims	Work incrementally to improve life locally for family and neighbors	Improving life for the local community through campaigning	Improving life of the various communities connected to professionally	Contributing to broader social movements or political causes	Finding innovative solutions that enable local change
Activities	Volunteering for the long-term on local issues	Striving persistently and energetically for a local cause	Building networks, managing processes and facilitating deliberative consensus-building	Mobilizing people by stimulating critical self-reflection for collective action	Forging wide-ranging alliances through collaborative innovation to find practical solutions
Resources	Live in the neighborhood No direct access to formal (political, organizational or financial) resources Draw on local knowledge, reputation and integrity to build community networks over time	Live in the neighborhood No direct access to formal (political, organizational or financial) resources Draw on local knowledge to build tightly-bonded networks of like-minded people	Do not live in the neighborhood Access to formal (political, organizational or financial) resources Adept at operating in a political environment and construct wide-ranging networks of local and formal support	Do not live in the neighborhood No direct access to formal (political, organizational or financial) resources Mobilize local assets by persuading people to build connections to foster social change	Do not necessarily live in the neighborhood Access to formal (political, organizational or financial resources) Building strategic alliances that blur established boundaries to support local networks in finding unforeseen solutions

Appendix 1: Factor Arrays for Q-sample of statements

	Statement	*Factor Scores*				
	The person I have in mind…	*1*	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*
1	Wants a fairer society	1	0	1	4	3
2	Puts others first	2	-2	-1	1	-3
3	Sees their work as political	-4	0	-3	1	0
4	Thinks they can help to change society	-2	-1	-1	4	1
5	Helps others to make sense of their own situation	0	-3	-1	3	0
6	Sees their role as more than just a job	-1	1	0	2	3
7	Lives in the neighbourhood	4	2	-4	-1	0
8	Is well known locally	2	4	-2	-1	2
9	Has local knowledge	2	3	0	0	2
10	Is credible with different groups	1	1	2	1	4
11	Brings people together and creates networks	1	0	3	3	2
12	Has access to people in power	-1	2	2	-3	-2
13	Has organisational backing and resources	-3	-2	0	-2	0
14	Has money or financial backing	-3	-3	-2	-4	-2
15	Has political support	-3	-1	-1	-3	-4
16	Takes the time to build trust	3	-2	2	1	0
17	Makes a long-term commitment to stay in the	3	2	-2	-2	3

	neighbourhood					
18	Knows where to go, who to speak to, who the players are and how to play the game	-1	3	4	-1	1
19	Tries to build alliances even with those who oppose their work	0	-1	1	1	-3
20	Uses humour to get things done	0	-1	1	0	-1
21	Accepts that there are people who will never get involved	3	0	-1	0	-1
22	Finds smart ways to bend the rules	-2	2	1	-1	-2
23	Encourages people to act together	4	0	3	3	-1
24	Can improvise when things do not go according to plan	0	1	3	2	0
25	Manipulates others to achieve their purposes	-4	0	-4	-4	-4
26	Has professional skills	-1	-4	2	0	4
27	Learns by doing	1	1	0	2	1
28	Has led an interesting life	-1	-2	-1	0	1
29	Challenges boundaries	0	1	2	2	0
30	Listens more than they talk	0	-4	-2	-1	-2
31	Is a ‘less talk, more action’ kind of person	2	3	1	0	1
32	Can influence and inspire others	0	2	3	3	2
33	Actually likes people	3	0	0	2	1
34	Is able to step back and reflect	1	-3	1	2	-1
35	Is more loyal to the communities they work	0	1	-2	-1	-1

	with more than to the policies they are meant to deliver					
36	Doesn't give up, even if they may not 'win'	1	4	0	0	-3
37	Is entrepreneurial and seeks new opportunities	-2	1	4	-2	3
38	Can be annoying	-3	3	-3	-3	-2
39	Is someone who knows a bit of everything, but is not an expert in anything	-2	-1	-1	-2	-3
40	Practices what they preach	2	-2	0	1	2
41	Can fight and make up	-1	-1	0	-2	-1
42	Has a lot in common with the people they work with	1	-2	-2	-3	0
43	Tries to put themselves in other people's shoes	2	-3	1	1	1
44	Risks burning out	-2	0	-3	-2	-2
45	Is very emotionally involved	-1	2	-3	-1	2
46	Can cope with uncertainty	-2	-1	2	0	-1

Appendix 2: Shape of the response grid

-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Unlike	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	*Like*
	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	
		_____	_____	_____	_____	_____		
		_____	_____	_____	_____	_____		
			_____	_____	_____			
				_____				