

Hybridity: a distinct identity

(you cannot fly on one wing only)

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1. Introduction

Hybridity is an abstract notion that means a lot to few people, and little to many. Yet it also marks one of the most promising strands in Public Administration, Third Sector studies in particular. Only very recently has it come firmly on the international research agenda. However, it suffers from terminological confusion and inadequate conceptualisation. Hybridity can be described only in terms of notions that signify something else, indicating what is not or what is in terms of the elements it is built from.

In the most general terms, hybridity refers to “*heterogeneous arrangements, characterised by mixtures of pure and incongruous origins, (ideal)types, “cultures”, “co-ordination mechanisms”, “rationalities” or action logics*” (Brandsen, Van de Donk and Putters, 2005). From such a broad type of description, one can basically work forward in two ways. The first is to operationalise the various elements of the mix and to look at the effects of different configurations. This is the type of research currently most widely undertaken, and this approach is essential for setting up systematic empirical research.

However, this approach should eventually be joined by attempts at a conceptual step forward. The concept of a mix is based on traditional idealtypes, which we find inadequate to describe current empirical phenomena; that is, the idealtypes lose their value as methodological instruments. But one should simultaneously work towards a *positive* notion of what hybridity is (and essentially get rid of the notion itself). More specifically, we need to discover the essence of hybrid organisations and networks.

This paper represents a first attempt to explore both wings: empirically as well as theoretically. In paragraph two, we will describe the empirical developments that have put the concept of hybridity on the research agenda. We will show both the importance and the shortcomings of empirical research on hybrid forms. Paragraph three gives a brief overview of the literature on and theoretical approaches of the subject. A common thread in these approaches, is that they all conceptualize hybridity in terms of a combination or mix of various elements, e.g. public-private, state-market-civil society, hierarchy-market-network. We will argue in paragraph four that this distorts our perspective and suggest some directions for an alternative approach, which would focus on the distinct identity of hybrid forms.

This paper represents our first modest attempt to take the conceptual debate a step further and could be seen as a first attempt to fly by jumping off a small mound. It represents the starting points and first offspring of the research programme of the Tilburg School of Politics and Public Administration (TSPPA). The TSPPA focuses on changes in the third sector, with a particular interest in hybrid organisations. This theme has been examined in several fields, through a collection of small and theoretically linked projects (see box). As such, this is not a paper that stands alone. We must emphasize that it represents only our first thoughts on theoretical development and can only be inadequate.

The theoretical starting-point of the research of the Tilburg School of Politics and Public Administration is defined in publications by Van de Donk (2001) and Brandsen, Van de Donk and Putters (2005). Although its immediate aim has been to analyse various hybrid organisations, the long-term goal has been conceptual innovation. The research programme has included several commercially funded intensive case studies of non-profit organisations in the fields of housing, health care, elderly and home care and social services. An example is the Eiffel project, presented in the paper by Cardoso Ribeiro & Karré in this session. In addition, our group participates in the Third Sector European Policy project (see <http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/TSEP/>) and the international Housing Association Diversification project, both of which will also be presented within the 2005 Study Group.

2. The rise of hybrid organisations

One could say that hybridity is a typical public administration phenomenon. The mechanisms that determine the dynamics within the traditional public domains appear to be shifting to other domains, making it hard to say what it means to be in one or another. The market idealtypically organises co-operation and the allocation of goods and services by means of competition (based on the exit mechanism); the state typically relies on hierarchy and other coercive forms of authority (held in check by the mechanism of voice), and community is associated with care and altruism (which, forcing Hirschman's scheme a bit, could be related to the notion of loyalty) (Hirschman, 1970). Yet many services and goods provided by public organisations appear to be co-ordinated by a mixture of exit *and* voice *and* loyalty. This is especially true for third sector organisations.

This is why many organisations, networks and governance systems found in the third sector are hybrids that defy the "pure" co-ordination mechanisms of the textbooks (this is also why third sector is crucial: to understand hybridity we will have to look where the tension between the logics of the different domains is highest). In our earlier work, it was noted that the third sector was in a phase of transition (Brandsen, Van de Donk and Putters, 2005). As Frumkin has put it, "the lines delimiting the sector have frequently been subject to challenge and revision, as funds and responsibilities have shifted back and forth among business, non-profit and government organisations. Reaching consensus on the very definition of non-profit and voluntary sector is difficult because many of the core features and activities of nonprofits increasingly overlap and compete with those of business and government" (Frumkin, 2002. For examples, we need only refer to the case studies presented during this session.

Salamon identifies three causes for such cross-overs: (1) Changes from 'below' (bottom-up), initiated by organisations and individuals undertaking activities in order to strengthen their position in claiming certain goods and rights; (2) incentives from the outside: professional and voluntary activities are encouraged by churches or humanitarian, social, or ideological groups and/or

governments supporting those activities (e.g. subsidising them) in order to promote a sense of community and individual responsibility; (3) support from above: governments encouraging public-private partnerships and hybridity in order to provide public goods more responsively and efficiently (Salamon, 1995). Another potential cause of change are the requirements and options generated by the technical characteristics of goods and services (Hemerijck and Helderman, 1995). For instance, information asymmetries related to health care services, often named as a reason for its present mode of non-government or non-profit form of organisation, are changing because of the potential of information technology.

In an absolute sense, there is of course nothing new about fuzziness, especially not in Continental Europe. However, in recent times more and more public sector actors appear to end up in these fuzzy, plural, complex, constantly changing spaces. In particular third sector organisations see themselves placed in situations in which they have to fulfil contrary needs and demands: providing unselfish care as much as possible (for this is what the customer wants) and maintaining a financial solid business; staying in complete control of educational programmes (in order to account for the expense of public resources) and encouraging professionals to passionately teach their classes and innovate their programmes, competing in a health care market and working closely together with your competitors. This perception of hybridity makes it almost impossible to manage, steer and navigate public sector organizations which find themselves obliged to constantly shift between traditional, archetypal domains and quadrants. They appear to do so at an increasing rate, making it hard to pin them down permanently within one of the domains or quadrants. Consequently, not only is the third sector divided into many segments, but these segments are also increasingly dynamic and hybrid, to the point that the distinctions between them are of diminishing significance in an empirical sense. If anything can be said to characterise the present third sector, it is change and metamorphosis. This must be regarded as one of its distinguishing features these days.

Even so, we lack proper concepts to describe the inherent contradictories and transitions of contemporary public administration. It is difficult to move beyond repeated assertions that the world is very complex –a statement that has numerous historical echoes. Empirically, all the evidence suggests that something new is happening, and we cannot lay our finger on it. Public administration practice and practitioners urge us to find ways to cope with the mix of (sometimes impossible) contradictory demands, its deriving administrative tensions and the continuous changes and metamorphoses.

In the meanwhile we are somewhat desperately tempted to think that the social sciences and day-to-day public management remain dominated by antiquated concepts, many of American origin, and often straight from the 19th century. Although we understand that it is important to work on top of existing concepts, slowly gathering the empirical weight to topple them; here, we will proceed towards the conceptual level immediately. As we will demonstrate in the next paragraph, the knowledge of hybridity in literature as well as in practice is fragmented and incomplete. Therefore it is time to construct a

systematic base of evidence. In the meanwhile, much may be gained from (researchers and public managers) striding confidently into the minefield.

3. Theoretical approaches

One cannot even begin to describe all the literature on mixed forms, as this ranges from ancient philosophy to modern car manufacturing. We will therefore focus on the literature that has directly inspired the analysis of hybrid organisations in public service delivery. Even with such a restricted focus, one must conclude that the concept has been approached from various perspectives, each emphasizing different aspects of the phenomenon and come to different definitions. We will here sketchily identify the most important and determine their strengths and weaknesses in analysing empirical phenomena.

Research in public management and public administration

One must first emphasize that the bulk of literature dealing with hybridity in the public sector never uses the term. It is often described in terms of mixes between public and private forms of provision (sometimes defined legally, but more often not defined) and discussed in terms of how it relates to existing arrangements. As such, it is mentioned in overviews such as the Pollitt and Bouckaert study (2004) or studies in a specific geographical area, such as Wettenhall's overview of developments in Australia (2003). The concept of hybridity has been picked up in research and publications on hybrid networks and public private partnerships (e.g. Kickert, Klijn and Koppenjan, 1997). In addition to this, there is a wide array of case studies in the American, Asian, European or Pacific context. At a more abstract level, there are instances of authors generalising from one or a few case studies, such as Koppell (2003) and Brandsen (2004), or focusing on a single country (e.g. In 't Veld, 1995; 1997 in the Netherlands).

Even within such a small range, the diversity of perspectives is such that it is difficult to see a cumulative effect. Moreover, a significant part of the literature has a biased approach, either in favour of or against the concept. Summing up, one can say that literature in public management and public administration has a widely developed empirical basis, but suffers from fragmented and often superficial theorising. It offers broad evidence that hybrid organisations challenge existing institutional arrangements, e.g. in political control or democratic accountability, but few ideas on how to reform those arrangements. In that sense, its approach has mostly been a negative one.

Third sector research

Interestingly enough, there has been an upsurge of interest in hybrid forms in research on the third sector and the social economy. Empirically, this is not surprising, as the development of the third sector and of the public sector are often intertwined. However, the concept of a distinct third sector is still vigorously defended by many scholars in the field, particularly in the US, who

regard hybridity as irrelevant, or worse. It is only quite recently that it has become more accepted in these circles. The institutionalisation of European third sector research, the publication of an authoritative volume (Evers & Laville, 2004), and debates on European Union internal market policy have been key in this. At present, this type of research is still largely based in Continental Europe, although it is finding increasing acceptance elsewhere. It defines hybridity as cross-cutting state, market and civil society. The Dutch (e.g. Hupe & Meijs, 2001; Dekker, 2004; Brandsen & Van de Donk, 2005) and Germans (e.g. Evers, 2003; Bode, 2003) have been particularly active in promoting this. It is in these countries that the third sector has historically been most involved in service provision, and therefore been most caught up in the transformation of the state described above. However, the concept of the “social enterprise” seems to link this type of research with research on co-operatives and participative enterprises, bringing together two strands of third sector research.

The strength of this approach is that it has emerged from a research with a long history of definitional disputes. Consequently, whatever emerges is well-considered and not subject to the same whimsical tendencies one can find in public administration research. It is also good in embedding the analysis of hybrid organisations within a larger social and historical context, where public administration research tends to focus on more instrumental issues. On the downside, fairly little has yet emerged, and it has not yet been linked systematically to research at the organisational level.

Organisational sociology

There is no strand in organisational theory that has explicitly dealt with hybrid organisations, but the concept of mixed organisations can be traced back to the work of people like Cyert, March and Simon. The lack of coherence and ambiguity in organisational principles was discovered years before the policy-focused researchers in disciplines such as public administration did. Potentially, theory in organisational sociology has precisely the type of tools necessary for an intensive analysis. Unfortunately, the type of mix that organisational theory tends to refer to is different from that focused on in empirical studies of hybrid organisations. The latter tend to describe the mix in terms of public/private, or as state/market/civil society, i.e. as belonging to a certain sphere in society. By contrast, organisational theory looks primarily at mixing in terms of internal co-ordination through hierarchy, network or market (e.g. Mayntz, 2004) and/or as the product of diverse environmental influences. While it is theoretically strong, and quite relevant, conceptual differences create obstacles for its direct use in the previously mentioned threads of research. Also, the emphasis is on organisational survival within its environment –an effect of the contingency paradigm of recent decades- with less attention for organisational impact.

Conclusion

This overview has been very brief and we plan to expand it in future work. What is clear is that the literature on hybrid organisations is potentially wide,

but scattered. There is not yet a systematic base of evidence to draw on, nor even a common frame of reference that would allow us to construct one. A common thread in all the approaches, though, is that all they conceptualize hybridity in terms of a combination or mix of various elements, e.g. public-private, state-market-civil society, hierarchy-market-network. We will argue in the next paragraph that this distorts our perspective.

4. Towards a positive description: the distinct identity of hybridity

Broadening the perspective

The problem with conventional conceptualisations is that they only describe hybrid organisations and arrangements in terms of their constituent parts (Branden, Van de Donk and Putters, 2005). This leads to an emphasis on pluralism and on tensions arising from the combination of different building blocks and rationalities. We are therefore beginning to know more about how hybrid organisations deal with internal conflicts. Also, the relation of internal tensions to external requirements (e.g. how commercial initiatives relate to public accountability requirements) are increasingly documented. If only public management and administration literature would incorporate the tools of organisational analysis more systematically, we might see the inklings of an evidence base. However that may be, there are two important areas of investigation that have so far received much less attention than they merit.

The first is the emergence of hybrid organisations. How exactly did they come into being? Although we can describe this in broad brushstrokes, there is little detailed analysis that tells us when organisations moved from “regular” to “hybrid”, and what forces were instrumental in this. An explicitly historical-institutional approach, as suggested by Evers & Laville (2004), will certainly benefit contemporary public administration theory and analysis. The second, which has received even less attention, is the impact of the forms that emerge. What do they do for society? In part, this is due to the lack of a common frame of reference and systematic measurement. However, it is also because we lack a proper concept of hybrid organisations. It is on this aspect that the remainder of the paper will focus.

Hybridity as identity

The problem is that impact, when it is described in the literature –and often this is only hypothetically- only relates to the constituent elements of the organisation. For example, its commercial ventures will alienate its volunteers, or cause friction with state supervisory bodies. There is no description of its impact across these isolated parts of its organisation or environment. This helps to explain why many analyses of hybrid arrangements cast a negative judgement on the phenomenon (e.g. Jacobs, 1994) and that authors with a more positive approach find it hard to describe the benefits (added value) of hybridity in anything but abstractions such as synergy. The inability to describe impact is, in effect, a failure to pinpoint identity.

We wish to suggest what such a distinct identity could look like. In this, we will focus on three aspects of new forms: (1) the logic of the (delivery of) products and services; (2) the social construction of cultural identities, and (3) the dynamic function of hybrid forms in relation to their environment.

Logic of delivery: rediscovery of the centaur

One could argue that the essence of the public sector derives from the characteristics of the goods and services that are the basis of such action, which Hemerijck and Helderma have described as the “logic of provision” (Hemerijck and Helderma, 1995). Each good and service has particular characteristics, whether technological or cultural, social, economical. This kind of product logic leads to an alternative analysis of hybrid objects: seeing them not from the constituent parts but from the essence of the hybrid entity e.g. the product or service of the public organization. It is like rediscovering the centaur (which has recently enjoyed renewed popularity thanks to J.K. Rowling): not a mix of horse and man, but a distinct entity with body parts that are carefully designed for its own specific purposes. That would mean that the development of a hybrid structure is not a historical accident, but the natural evolution towards a structure that more accurately reflects the tasks at hand.

For instance, this alternative approach would consider the organisations now emerging in the care sector not as an impossible combination of plural and conflicting demands, but as inherently hybrid. It is interesting to note that in European policymaking, there is now recognition of the specific nature of social and health services (see the paper on Services of General Interest in this workshop). Whatever the political deals behind this, it is a conceptually important recognition.

The dynamic function of hybridity: rediscovering the chameleon

Hybrid organisations could be classified by their strategies, as methods of adaptation to conflicting demands. Accordingly, if there are demands from multiple environments (or multiple demands from the one environment), the strategy will be aimed at reconciling those demands. Management will in that sense be a balancing act. Of course, one must take account of Evers and Laville’s comment that conceptual balancing is easy, whereas the real-life challenge is rather to deal with the effects of imbalances. Various types of organisational solutions may be explored. For example, Meyer and Rowan’s concept of “decoupling” refers to a method for meeting different demands by separating them within the organisational structure. This alternative approach stresses also the temporal character of hybridity and brings back pragmatism, opportunism and creativity as core characteristics of public actors. It is like rediscovering chameleons, identifying them by their strategy of changing colour whilst being one and single entity.

It is possible that in bouncing between different environments, hybrid organisations may serve to transfer elements between those environments. Examples could be the participatory elements that spread from Dutch non-profit schools to public schools (Dekker, 2001) or the dampening effect on

commercial rent levels that comes from a strong social housing sector (Kemeny, 1995). One could go so far as to interpret the establishment of hybrid organisations as a method for long-term policy innovation.

Social construction of (cultural) identity

The cultural aspect of hybrid organisations remains largely unexplored, but it is perhaps here that some of the major advances can be made (Karré, 2005). If we focus on the distinct identity of hybrid forms, we also need to search for what this means in terms of socially constructed identities. Professionals would be unlikely to describe themselves as hybrid, and it may well be possible that they achieve the conceptual unity that eludes researchers like us, who tend to be locked into existing analytical frameworks.

We suspect we can learn much from cultural anthropology and organisational sociology, both of which have a respectable academic tradition of studying the mechanisms and principles of the mix, integration or combination of different social groups and cultures, eventually forming distinct social group characteristics and group culture.

5. Conclusion

This paper represents unfinished work and we must apologise for leaving readers with an unsatisfied feeling. Our suggestion to incorporate new approaches and focus not simply on the constituent parts of hybrids is not to deny the effect of the constituent parts, or the value of research starting from such a basis. Rather, the two types of approach should be seen as two sides of the coin. To speak only of coping mechanisms and instability is to fly on one wing only; the other must be conceptualised in different terms. But we have some way to go yet.

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