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Permanently provisional: An ethnographic analysis of responsive governance practices in and through meetings

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Abstract

Scholars of responsive forms of governance tend to analyze agreements, arrangements, and architectures. Yet, these forms of governance also require actual actors to act and interact, something that has been scarcely empirically studied. Taking a practice-theoretical approach, I explore how responsive governance is accomplished in and through meetings. This study is based on participant observation, interviews, and document analysis of governance of child and family services in the Netherlands. It contributes to our current understanding of responsive forms of governance by situating its everyday practice in meetings. A second contribution can be found in the thorough analysis of its everyday practices, with actors continuously calibrating tasks, performance, scope, and authority. Third, this study develops an understanding of how practices of responsive governance relate to structural governance arrangements, exposing how structural contours can be challenged and changed, while other actions result in changes that remain invisible.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Scholars of responsive forms of governance tend to analyze agreements, arrangements, and architectures. Theorized under diverse labels such as “collaborative innovation,” “robust governance,” “pragmatist democracy,” or

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“experimentalist governance,” scholars have demonstrated how governance institutions that are adaptive, collaborative, experimentalist, or robust facilitate the achievement of basic public ambitions, functions, and values (e.g., Ansell, 2011; Ansell et al., 2023; Bryson et al., 2015; Sabel & Zeitlin, 2012; Sørensen & Torfing, 2011). Specifically emphasizing the importance of embracing flexibility, stimulating local experimentation, and aiming to learn, I refer to this body of literature as responsive forms of governance, or responsive governance. Notably, although in the field of study the importance of actual actors and their actions have been acknowledged, the focus has largely been on the design and institutional infrastructure of governance processes. The actions and interactions that are vital to accomplish responsive forms of governing in everyday work are scarcely researched, a gap I aim to fill in this article.

In this study, I draw from practice theories (Bartels, 2018; Cook & Wagenaar, 2012; Freeman et al., 2011; Wagenaar, 2004; Yanow, 2015) to foreground and analyze how governance is continuously produced and reproduced through everyday actions. Thus, I unpack *governance practices*. More specifically, drawing from insights of studies of everyday administrative work, I look at governance practices *in meetings* (Freeman, 2019; Goffman, 1959; Papadopoulos, 2018; Schwartzman, 1989; Van Oortmerssen et al., 2014), asking *how responsive governance is accomplished in and through meetings*. Informed by the practice approach and meeting research, I analyze what people do and say, their aims and concerns, the role of meeting conventions and artifacts, and the relation between governance practices and structural governance arrangements.

To answer the research question, I have conducted research on the local governance of child and family services in The Netherlands. This included 71 hours of participant observation of meetings, additional hours pre- and post-meeting, and the shadowing of key governance actors, following their governance practices for the duration of a year. This data was supplemented and triangulated with 27 interviews with public managers and municipal policymakers and document analysis. The ethnographic approach allowed to observe those practices that do not get documented or formalized, and the ambiguities and challenges of governing in practice.

This paper first contributes to our comprehension of responsive forms of governance by elucidating how everyday practices of responsive governance are situated in meetings. The analysis specifically shows the effects of informal meeting characteristics which enable constant monitoring, equal negotiation, the building of relationships, and quick adjustments, but also pose challenges to accountability and continuity. A second contribution can be found in the thorough analysis of its everyday practices, with actors continuously calibrating tasks, performance, scope, and authority. Third, this study develops an understanding of how practices of responsive governance relate to structural governance arrangements. It exposes how everyday actions sometimes reproduce or recreate the structural arrangements of responsive governance, while at other times challenging or changing the structural contours or creating variations or changes that remain outside the visibility of agreements, arrangements, and architectures. All in all, this study creates a nuanced image of responsive governance as both purposeful and pragmatic, as contingent and contested, as permanently provisional.

This article is organized into five sections. The next discusses research on governance and practice theories, and develops a framework for studying governance in and through meetings. The following section introduces child and family services in the Netherlands and specifically the local setting that was studied in-depth and then goes on to describe data collection and analysis. Then, we present the empirical analysis of local governance practices in meetings, introducing the calibration of tasks, performance, scope and authority, and their iterative and entangled relationship. The final section discusses the results and conclusions.

2 | THEORIES ON RESPONSIVE FORMS OF GOVERNANCE AND PRACTICE

Increasingly, scholars in the field of public administration, public management, and organization science address the need for public governance that is adaptive, collaborative, experimentalist, or robust to facilitate the achievement of

basic public ambitions, functions, and values (e.g., Ansell, 2011; Carstensen et al., 2022; Emerson & Gerlak, 2014; Ferraro et al., 2015; Sabel & Zeitlin, 2012; Sørensen & Torfing, 2011; Wagenaar & Wood, 2018). The body of literature reflects a scholarly search—partly based on ample empirical examples—to embrace flexibility in governance and enhance the problem-solving capacity of public organizations. The root of this search is not a singular development, but can be found in a rapidly changing environment, the sudden emergence of mega-crises, transnational issues without overarching sovereign, “simply” in the ever-existing democratic balancing act between stability and disruption, or—as in this case—the growing realization of the need for tailor-made services and solutions to meet the diversity of citizens’ needs. Comprising a diverse body of literature, I refer to these types of governance as *responsive forms of governance*, or *responsive governance*. Responsive governance is flexible to the situation at hand, meets current developments, learns and improves based on experience.

Answers to the search for flexibility and problem-solving capacity in governance are provided in the form of large theories and underlying institutional infrastructures and arrangements such as “cross-boundary collaboration,” “collaborative innovation,” “robust governance,” “pragmatist democracy,” or “experimentalist governance” (Ansell, 2011; Bryson et al., 2015; Carstensen et al., 2022; Sabel & Zeitlin, 2012; Sørensen & Torfing, 2011). These theories have been insightful in emphasizing the importance of collaboration as it stimulates innovation through the constructive exchange across boundaries of public agencies, levels of government, and/or the public, private, and civic spheres (Frankowski, 2019; Sørensen & Torfing, 2011). They have emphasized the potential of learning from experience across policy echelons (Ansell, 2011; Sabel & Zeitlin, 2012). The body of literature has demonstrated that flexibility in governance can be established through responsive and provisional policy and regulatory frameworks (Ayres & Braithwaite, 1992; Sabel & Zeitlin, 2012), and through the institutionalization of inter-organizational networks, partnerships or platforms, and corresponding collaboration agreements and relational contracting (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Ansell & Miura, 2020; Petersen et al., 2016; Torfing & Triantafillou, 2016). Furthermore, relational authority enhances a leader’s capacity to stimulate open-ended processes of experimentation and adjustment through consent “from below” and commitment to a common mission (Ansell, 2011). Notably, a central focus in theories of responsive governance are the institutions and structures, and the design and start of collaborative and adaptive processes (Berardo et al., 2014; Heikkilä & Gerlak, 2016; Ulibarri et al., 2020). Scholars have acknowledged the importance of actual actors and their actions in adaptive forms of governance (e.g., Ansell & Torfing, 2016; Capano & Toth, 2022; Emerson et al., 2012; Warsen et al., 2020), yet empirical examples have remained rare thus far.

The studies that have analyzed (inter-)actions of governance, sometimes referred to as the micro-level, have taught us several lessons. Multiple studies have exposed the pragmatic nature of governing, to “get things done”, which is often only loosely coupled or even uncoupled from formalized governance agreements, theories, or regulatory requirements (Blanco et al., 2014; Carter, 2018; Griggs & Sullivan, 2014; Huising & Silbey, 2011; Lindsey, 2014; Wagenaar & Wilkinson, 2015). In some studies, governance actors are shown to manage or reconcile the gap between regulatory expectations and everyday governing work, while largely maintaining structural governance arrangements (Huising & Silbey, 2011; Klenk, 2020; Schwabenland & Hirst, 2020). Yet, in others, actors achieve more fundamental change, disrupting or creating governance structures, sometimes formally encouraged by frameworks of adaptive governance (van de Bovenkamp et al., 2017; Van Erp et al., 2020; Wagenaar & Wilkinson, 2015). Often, such processes involve—strategies to deal with—multilayered tensions and power dynamics (Blijleven & van Hulst, 2022; La Grouw et al., 2020; van der Woerd et al., 2023; van Duijn et al., 2022; Waring & Crompton, 2020). All in all, studies have shown that the practice of governance is often far removed from its ideal, and that maintaining it requires work. To better understand the everyday dynamics of specifically responsive forms of governance, it is necessary to systematically analyze its particular everyday (inter-)actions (Stout et al., 2018; Wagenaar & Wilkinson, 2015).

Our focus on the (inter-)actions of governance derives from a practice-theoretical approach (Bartels, 2018; Cook & Wagenaar, 2012; Freeman et al., 2011; Wagenaar, 2004; Yanow, 2015). Central to a practice-theoretical approach is the premise that social—and administrative—life is an ongoing production and emerges through actors’

recurrent *actions and interactions* (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011). All practices are carried out in view of rules and norms, but also specific *aims* and lived *concerns* and are as such nonrandom, recurrent, and meaningful (Nicolini, 2012). While the recurrent actions constitute structures, those same enacted structures also constitute the ongoing actions (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011). Actions of governance are thus always already configured by structural conditions such as regulatory requirements, collaboration agreements, performance contracts, monitoring systems, but also skills, professional norms, moral order, and the experiences of previously performing the practice. Yet, every time a practice is performed, it is done in response to the situation at hand, “navigating political, bureaucratic, and moral swamps” (Bartels, 2018, p. 78). Every performance is improvised and pragmatic and can potentially reproduce or change the structural contours of governance. Governance practices are thus not accomplished in isolation, but in mutual constitution with *structural governance arrangements*. Lastly, practices have a material aspect, in its most basic form because practitioners need their body to do things in actual locations, but also because things, technologies, tangible physical entities might be needed to perform a practice. These *artifacts* structure practices (Freeman et al., 2011). In our study of governance practices, we look into these different elements.

More specifically as many administrative interactions take place in meetings, we look at governance practices in meetings (Freeman, 2019; Goffman, 1959; Papadopoulos, 2018; Schwartzman, 1989; Van Oortmerssen et al., 2014). In meeting research, many similar elements have been emphasized as key to a more thorough comprehension of the role of meetings in administrative and organizational practices. Meetings are focused interactions that involve at least two people who (I) assemble for specific aims or purposes related to the functioning of a specific community or organization and (II) with specific conventions for regulating the event (Goffman, 1959; Schwartzman, 1989). One often found function of meetings is to understand the situation, to make sense of the immediate encounter and the world beyond it. Participants attempt to develop agreement “as to whose claims concerning what issues will be temporarily honoured” (Goffman, 1959). Whereas documents are said to formalize the practices of government and are as such summative, stylized, standardized, and stabilizing accounts (Freeman & Maybin, 2011), meetings are formative, specifically suitable for exploration, discussion, deliberation, brainstorm, negotiation, and decision-making (Sandler & Thedvall, 2017; Visser & van Hulst, 2023). Furthermore, specific conventions and artifacts influence meetings' nature and structure what people do. Conventions might include the existence or character of procedures and rules about chairing, agenda-setting, invitation, and turn-taking (Hagene, 2015; Lamp; Schwartzman, 2017). Artifacts might include preparatory documents, location, room-design, and meeting minutes (Brown et al., 2017; Sandler & Thedvall, 2017). Conventions and artifacts can be characterized in terms of their formality. Formal meetings are often perceived as rituals, functioning to record, validate, legitimate, and disseminate decisions and decision-making processes (Lamp, 2017; Sandler & Thedvall, 2017). They have a public character, since what is said is recorded in official documents, as such communicating with the world outside of the meeting. Informal meetings serve explorative, creative, spontaneous exchanges. Their privateness and unofficial status contribute to genuine, internal communication, creating space for surprises including the negotiation of innovative proposals or unexpected conversions in position (Lamp, 2017). Finally, meeting research has emphasized the importance of not only looking at what happens in meetings, but also how it relates to and possibly reconfigures larger structures beyond it (Freeman, 2019). Assuming a practice approach and drawing from meeting research, we unpack governance practices by analyzing (A) what people do and say, (B) their aims and concerns, (C) the role of meeting conventions and artifacts, and (D) how practices relate to structural governance arrangements.

3 | RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1 | Local governance transformation in child and family services in the Netherlands

The analysis is based on an empirical study of the local governance of decentralized child and family services in the Netherlands. After decentralization in 2015, municipalities have become responsible for funding of and access to the

whole continuum of services from educational advice to child protection, and from behavioral therapy to services for mental or physical disabilities. The central aim of the transition was that services would be customized and street-level practitioners were stimulated to develop novel solutions for the families' complex constellations of problems. To enable the goal of customization, the national government developed the 2015 national youth act and corresponding regulation, which granted a large degree of discretionary power to municipalities to organize services that would fit the local context.¹ Furthermore, the national government explicitly aimed for local experimentation with organizational forms, contracting, and other arrangements and set up an infrastructure to learn from local experiences.

The local case under study followed the national goals of experimentation and learning from experience. I specifically studied—the (inter-) actions between—the local municipality and a local child and family service provider named CJG. The medium-sized municipality of Dunetown (a pseudonym) set up a team of policymakers who engaged in internal decision-making and political accountability to the local council, contracting and financial management, internally attuning with other social services, and—in consultation with stakeholders in the field—de- and refining policy. Most of the provision of child and family services was to be done by many small and large, generalist and specialist organizations, who were (re)contracted recurrently. Yet, a central position was given to the (semi-)private nonprofit organization CJG Dunewater (a pseudonym—in which CJG is the Dutch acronym for Centre for Child and Family; *Centrum voor Jeugd en Gezin*). CJG Dunewater was commissioned to grant families formal access to services and to provide primary educational services.² The municipality thus “contracted out” its access to child and family services, but remained *politically* and *financially* responsible. Together, the municipality and the CJG aimed to customize, experiment with, and adjust the provision of services, the organization of work, and local policy and regulation.

To embed experimentation and consecutive adjustments in its local governance, the municipality developed a provisional policy framework in 2013, laying the basis for the decentralization while creating room to learn and develop policy, contracting, organizational infrastructure and street-level practices. The municipality deliberately did not spend its time developing detailed, formalized policy documents, leaving space and time for quick adjustments based on everyday experience. The municipality commissioned the CJG through a subsidy. An annual performance contract specified agreements, including development goals to be pursued. Performances were not defined in numbers, or enforced, rather the agreement included mutual goals and—ongoing or envisioned—innovative projects. A monitoring system was under development during our research in 2017, for which accountability largely took shape in narrative form. To coordinate, collaborate, and adapt to experiences, the organizations set up a variety of recurring meetings. Together with the provisional policy document, the subsidy and open-ended performance contract and the narrative monitoring, the meetings formed the local infrastructure to enable—in their terms—“responsive governance.” The flexible character of the local governance between both organizations makes this a suitable case for this study.

3.2 | Data collection

This study combines an ethnographic approach with Nicolini's (Nicolini, 2009) framework of zooming in and out. The framework provides a lens to study how real-time work activities are carried out in the workplace and the relationship between workplace activities and the organizing process. Zooming in comprises of looking at the details and specific aspects of work activities in a specific place to make sense of how it is locally accomplished. I zoomed in on the practices of actors through which they governed in meetings; observing what people *said and did*, in view of which *aims and concerns*, and how the accomplishment related to the *conventions and artifacts of the meetings*. Zooming out serves to understand the connectedness of a practice and the fact that activities never happen in isolation. I zoomed out by observing how governing practices *related to structural governance arrangements*.

I assumed a role of passive participant observer (Agar, 2008). Both the organization and the individual actors had given consent to the study in a series of meetings. The topic of the study was communicated only in general

terms in an attempt not to induce socially desirable behavior. Access was granted, in part, in exchange of the active sharing of findings and the implications for the involved organizations. The researcher did not participate in any of the organizations activities and was open about the role, exemplified by consistent introduction as researcher and by overt note-taking during observations.

My focus on meetings developed gradually. Part of a larger research project on everyday customization and experimentation in child and family services, the first phase of fieldwork activities had focused on street-level practices. One of the sensitizing questions centered around the role of governance in responsive, customized service provision. After several months of observations, I found that, as the governance infrastructure was provisional, governance was largely performed in meetings. This sparked my interest as it had received scarce attention in governance literature. I observed that many acts of *doing governance* did not resurface in documents at all. I therefore decided to more closely observe governance practices in meetings.

The fieldwork comprised 71 hours of participant observation of meetings, additional hours pre- and post-meeting, and the shadowing of key governance actors, following their governance practices between December 2016 to December 2017. To get a thorough understanding of what happened in and through meetings and the relation between them, we participated in all possible instances of specific meetings in that year. Underlying documents—such as policy plans, performance contracts, and meeting documents—were analyzed. In addition, 27 interviews were conducted (all between 1 and 2 h) and many informal conversations—often before and after meetings—with policymakers and managers about their work and their governance practices. Observation notes were made directly on a laptop during observations where possible verbatim. All notes were quickly after extended into elaborate fieldnotes (Emerson et al., 1995). Formal interviews were recorded and transcribed.

3.3 | Data analysis

The analysis of the data was done abductively, in an iterative cycle between data and theory (Klag & Langley, 2013). This approach allowed for open exploration, while also embedding it in and further developing existing theories. In identifying governance practices, I started from a rather narrow definition of governance, analyzing “who can do what on who's authority” (Tuohy, 2003), and the setting, monitoring and enforcing of thereof (Mascini & Erp, 2014). I engaged in multiple reflection sessions with peers to discuss, question, aggregate, or rename codes and categories, their cues, and definitions, leading to refined analysis.

The first step of the analysis was to identify *performances* of governance practices in the data. Performances of practices are the specific (inter-) actions by specific actors in a specific moment in time and place that possibly create, maintain, or modify the pattern of the practice (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011). This step resulted in a chronological list of demarcated governance “events.” To this list of performances, I added details of observation notes about conventions and artifacts, and excerpts of interview data that related to events or topics and exposed conventions, intentions, and concerns.

As a second step in the analysis, I systematically compared the performances, characteristics, and quotes. I identified that some performances did something else than others. A back and forth between comparing the performances and a theoretical exploration (Gioia et al., 2013; Van Maanen, 1979) led to me to categorize the performances. I identified a first type of activity that was related to the (re)defining or (re)assigning of *tasks*. Subsequently, I observed that many performances dealt with a kind of in situ, in vivo assessing and negotiating of experiences and the underlying norms of those assessments, labeled *performance*. I then distinguished activities that resembled Goffman's (1959) concept of “understanding the situation.” To perform governance, the participant needed to define what was to be governed. These activities were labeled *scope*. A final type of activity was related to the exercise of *authority* and the definition of who could exercise authority. In this step, I established that the four types of governance work all had a similar nature; they all included the production and reproduction, negotiation, contestation, and change of the tasks, performance, scope, and authority. I labeled these acts “calibrating,” as they

entailed both reproduction and recreation, and adjustment and adaptation. The acts of calibrating tasks, performance, scope, and authority are presented in the results.

A final step in the analysis was to further scrutinize the four subpractices in terms of the framework. For every subpractice, I defined the doings and sayings (the actions and interactions), interpreted underlying aims and concerns based on related interview quotes, and analyzed and identified the impact of the conventions and artifacts of the meetings. I zoomed out by exploring their mutual relation with structural governance arrangements. An overview of the findings is included in the beginning of the findings section. A visualization is presented in the final section of the findings. As supporting information, a data structure is included in the appendix with additional empirical examples of the different categories. The structure does not include all empirical material, but provides additional data that grounds the findings described in the results section to validate the analysis.

4 | FINDINGS

The analysis shows how governance actors accomplished responsive governance in everyday practice. Responsive governance entails negotiation, experimentation and adjustment to make sure it continuous to be flexible to specific situations, it continues to meet current developments, it continuous to learn and improve from experience. To do so, governance actors met and interacted in meetings. In meetings, the governance actors were continuously (re) assigning and (re)defining tasks, continuously assessing and negotiating experiences and the norms they adhere to, continuously identifying, interpreting, and negotiating the object they were governing and the developments that mattered to do so, and continuously (re)establishing and shifting the position and relation toward each other. I interpret the four activities or subpractices of responsive governance as acts of calibrating.

In the following subsections, I unpack the empirical patterns of the four identified subpractices of governance; (1) calibrating tasks, (2) calibrating performance, (3) calibrating scope, (4) calibrating authority. I do so by following the four central elements of practices elaborated in the theoretical framework; analyzing their (A) actions and interactions, (B) aims and concerns, (C) conventions and artifacts, and (D) relation to structural governance arrangements. I provide an overview of the subpractices in Table 1. The presentation of the findings is enriched with examples that illustrate what the acts of governance might look like in practice. In the final section of the findings, I come to a more abstract understanding of the practice of responsive governance based on a synthesis of the four subpractices.

4.1 | Calibrate tasks

The calibration of tasks comprises the continuous (re-) assigning and (re-) defining of tasks and responsibilities and their specific interpretation and boundaries. Calibrating tasks sometimes happened within one meeting, but could envelop over several meetings. Participants discussed possibilities, negotiated and adjusted within meetings, while gathering additional information and deliberating with their respective organizations between meetings. The practice concerned tasks of both organizations, as they together developed an understanding of their roles and responsibilities. This process was prompted by new national regulation, developments in professional guidelines, problems or hiatus in the existing organization and experiences by the practitioners. The tasks remained provisional. Some tasks were continuously subject to negotiation and discussion, while others were more stable, yet the possibility of adjustment and redefinition over time persisted.

Central to the subpractice was the *aim* to regularly and quickly adjust tasks. A policymaker explained: “We prefer not to put anything on paper, as it is outdated by the time it is written down. Everything develops so quickly [...] we discuss the going concern; what are developments, how are projects going, and then we determine together how to proceed” (Interview January 2017, policymaker). Nevertheless, the calibration of tasks was performed in light of multiple *concerns*. The actors regularly had to deal with municipal peers, who urged them to follow procurement or

TABLE 1 Overview of findings.

	Actions and interactions	Aim and concerns	Conventions and artifacts	Relation to other arrangements
Calibrate tasks	Continuous (re-) assigning and (re-) defining of tasks and responsibilities and their specific interpretation and boundaries.	Aim to regularly and quickly adjust tasks. Concern of complying with regulation and providing professional guidelines, of expanding tasks and the need for documentation.	Informality allows quick and equal negotiation.	Governance documents create direction, but not referred to in everyday practice. Decisions are first implemented and only in certain situations included in new documents.
Calibrate performance	Continuous assessing and negotiating of experiences and the norms they adhere to	Aim to signal the latest developments and learn from performance. Concern of ad hoc nature and lack of formalization.	Informality enables equal turn-taking, discussion of very recent or ongoing developments, safe atmosphere	Alongside systematic and formal monitoring. Has distinct functions.
Calibrate scope	Continuous (re-) defining of scope of governance and interpretation thereof.	Aim to ensure continuity and completeness. Concern of unpredictability and failing memory.	Informality both creates the need and allows for this practice.	Difficult to accomplish in structural arrangements. Creates dependency of meetings.
Calibrate authority	Continuous (re) establishing and shifting of position and relations towards other governance actors.	Aim to build and maintain relationship and collaboration. Concern of (equal) relationship falling apart.	Informality contributes to equal exchange and equality in relationship. Location creates inequality.	Principles of relationship defined in structural arrangements, but needed to be performed in interaction.

contracting regulation. They were also confronted with street-level practitioners who asked for more guidelines. As a result, the actors jointly started to develop extensive guidelines for very specific tasks, for example on the development of personal budget plans, this way losing the provisional character. Furthermore, the actors performed the sub-practice with concerns of their own. For example, the expansion of tasks needed to be documented to ensure recognition and additional funding (e.g., February 14, 2017, interview May 2017, manager, Interview June 2017, manager).

The *conventions and artifacts* of the meeting were highly informal in the sense that they were not materialized in documents or formal authority. A meeting agenda, preparatory documents, and meeting minutes were generally—with some exceptions—not made. The meetings were small, invitation-only, happened in closed meeting rooms, without a chair. As a result, participants experienced freedom and equality in the introduction of topics and alternating turns in the discussion thereof. Very recent developments could be discussed and decided upon. And sensitive, innovative and unexpected alternatives were discussed. The actors made many decisions in the meetings. When formal decisions were necessary, the actors worked together to obtain them.

The calibration of tasks in meetings was *structured by and restructured certain governance arrangements*. The local policy document provided direction for the general division of tasks, but was further defined and extended in the

subpractice. The performance contract was more accurate in the latest agreements on key tasks, but defined many projects as experiments that needed further definition, also in practice. Interestingly, the contract was not mentioned during meetings, nor used to restrict the adjustment of tasks. For the municipality, the contract served accountability purposes toward the local council. For the CJG it served to create overview, both for themselves and for the municipality as their commissioning party, creating the possibility for additional funding. Re-assigned tasks were therefore included in the next performance contract in two situations. First, when the task extensions were significant, often with considerable costs that needed coverage, and second when policymakers or their alderman wanted to present “showpiece” projects to the local council. This was done after the adjustments were implemented, as actors did not want to wait for formalization. In other situations, calibrated tasks remained under the radar. Interestingly, part of these were situations where calibration upon calibration made previous adjustments obsolete. In these situations, the meetings replaced the making of up-to-date policy and complemented performance contracts.

4.2 | Calibrate performance

The calibration of performance entailed assessing and negotiating experiences and the norms they adhere to. This process was dynamic and quick, dealing with the latest developments and assessing the most recent adjustments, and challenging the norms that inspired assessments. Both the municipality and the CJG were assessed in the meetings. Below follows a shortened discussion that serves as an illustration. It shows that the performance is contested and negotiated and that the interaction is aimed at solving a problem and learning from the assessment.

In a meeting with multiple policymakers and a manager, policymaker Emma starts a discussion about a signal that the practitioners are not visible enough in a certain neighborhood. She asks whether a professional can be present at the counter of the local social work team and join consultation hours. Policymaker Barbara replies: “But do we then abandon the vision that CJG does not have a counter-function? [...] We should ask whether you are at the right places, and whether you collaborate properly with local social work teams.” Manager Natalie does not agree with the complaint. Yet, she argues that they are planning to locate their local CJG team in the same building as the social work team. This way they could meet each other physically. Emma replies: “I don't really care how we organize it; the signal is that you aren't visible enough. You can also work from the local school, as long as you are visible at the basic infrastructure where parents come.” (Observation meeting, 26 January 2017).

The *aim* of calibrating performance is to signal the latest developments, the ones that were not yet on documented or inscribed on paper. It also aimed at creating a space for understanding and making the norms themselves subject of discussion. A policymaker provides an example: “We agreed the website would be ready by now, but [the CJG] did not achieve it. I prefer to have a conversation about what happened and how come [...] I do not want to hold them to it, when there is a good reason why things develop the way they develop” (Interview January 2017). The activities did come with several *concerns*. Whereas CJG managers feared that the focus on incidents and the ad hoc character drew a negative picture of the CJG (Interview June 2017, manager), municipal policymakers argued that the lack of a record of negative developments might complicate termination of the subsidy if that would ever be necessary (Interview January 2017, policymaker).

The informal *meeting conventions and its artifacts* created the space and atmosphere for quick and honest negotiation of their performance. The absence of an agenda, chair and preparatory documents made the meetings flexible, for which ad hoc signals and ongoing developments were addressed. Both actors regularly addressed issues, sometimes even things that happened that same day. The absence of meeting minutes contributed to interactions in which signals were challenged, vulnerability was displayed in discussing what went wrong, what needed to improve, and what alternative possibilities existed.

The calibration of performance largely functioned parallel to *formal monitoring arrangements*. The national monitoring system had a very narrow focus on numbers of treatments and was locally perceived as limitedly relevant to capture local developments. At the local level, a monitoring dashboard was still in development. The dashboard was aimed to capture local care use for accountability toward the council and to generate information on the level of professional teams to enable exchange and learning within and among them. The actors were skeptical about the role of the monitoring system in capturing the latest developments that needed quick calibration and about the genuine exchange it could generate. Therefore, they expected that the informal calibration of performance would continue to exist.

4.3 | Calibrate scope

A third subpractice was the calibration of the scope of what was being governed. Participants defined and redefined what it was that was actually being governed. This consisted of catching up on developments to define the scope of governance, exchanging particular interpretations of the scope, and convincing the other of their interpretation. The CJG and municipality caught up on activities and developments that had happened in previous meetings, previous to the meeting, or were happening in parallel. In the observation below, the actors catch up on developments in extended child welfare and the role of social work teams and check each other's interpretation of the functioning of those teams.

Policymaker Barbara and manager Natalie are discussing extended child and family services. Now after the age of 18, services are allocated by municipal social work teams. Barbara argues: "There is this lingering issue of data exchange [between the CJG teams and municipal social work teams]. There are now people proposing to allocate child and family services [via CJG] until 27 years. But social work has to take over at some point." Natalie responds: "There is always going to be a dividing line. It doesn't have to be handled very tightly, but it has to be somewhere." Barbara states that the social work teams are developing with an enormous speed, but that there are vast differences in development and stability. Natalie then asks: "In confidence and concealment, do you think the social work teams are doing well?" Barbara responds: "That's tricky. They first think and then act, they are very pragmatic. There is a role for us to help them develop, to show them our way of working." (Observation meeting, 23 February 2017).

This practice of calibrating scope can be understood as a tacit subpractice, for which the underlying *aims and concerns* are generally not expressed. The observations showed that there was little structure to capture what had been agreed between meetings, as the actors ran from meeting to meeting. The actors needed to develop a—shared—understanding of the scope of what they were governing before they could engage in other governing activities (Interview policymaker, January 2017). Calibrating the scope served to ensure continuity. Concerns revolved around failing (collective) memory, as updates were sometimes forgotten and did not endure (Interview policymaker, April, 2017).

With multiple sequences of parallel meetings and the informal *conventions and lack of documents*, calibrating the scope becomes a vital activity. The absence of meeting minutes led the actors to recall and reproduce what was discussed in previous meetings. The absence of agenda created the time and space to catch up on the latest developments, which the actors did extensively. However, it also created a degree of unpredictability and unpreparedness. Overall, calibrating the scope took up a large part of the meetings. It wasn't uncommon to cost more than half of the meeting. "I have a whole laundry list of catching up"; a policymaker informed a manager at the beginning of one meeting (Observation meeting 16 November 2017).

This activity is difficult to accomplish in *structural governance arrangements*. Policy documents or performance contracts do not include the latest developments, nor do they serve to exchange and convince each other of specific interpretations. Meeting minutes can assume this function, but were deliberately not made to ensure speed, trust, and creativity in decision-making. The observations exposed that the actors needed new meetings to make sure

there was nothing they needed to know about before engaging in other governance activities. This led to the development of a trajectory in which the calibration of scope connected new meetings with previous meetings.

4.4 | Calibrate authority

A final subpractice that we observed was the continuously (re)establishing and shifting of position and relations towards each other. The authority positions were dynamic between and even within meetings and were alternated and experimented with. The municipality and CJG enacted an equal relation when they were developing strategies and plans together. They developed plans together and often jointly discussed and strategized how to present results in a council report, how to approach a decision-making process, or what the right route was for acquiring additional funding. Yet, the actors shifted to more hierarchical positions. The municipal policymakers confirmed their commissioning authority, for example by urging the CJG managers to do something, or reprimanding them for errors. The CJG managers challenged the municipality's position by urging it to take position and provide structures on specific topics or by challenging it to take a more commissioning position in general. At other times the CJG managers claimed their legal mandate to make decisions when this mandate was challenged by municipal actions.

In terms of their *aims*, both actors expressed the vital role of meeting for their collaborative work and the related need to build and maintain the relation. The actors knew how to enact and negotiate authority, but did not reflect on the continuous shifting of their position. There were *concerns*. Over time the municipal policymakers appealed to their commissioning role more regularly, in response to colleagues who expressed worries about the lack of control and the growing expenses. In response, CJG managers experienced a decrease in trust and commented on the vulnerable nature of their position and relation.

The informal meeting *conventions* described earlier, including the absence of an agenda and preparatory meeting documents, and the absence of a chair, contributed to an equal exchange between the actors, reproducing the equality in positions. The physical location of the meetings was alternated between the CJG offices and city hall, resulting in the rotation of the roles of “host” and “visitor.” Whereas previously managers had access passes to city hall, these had been retracted after “an inventory.” Since, the managers had to wait at the entrance to be escorted to the meeting room. They often made comments about how they had become visitors at city hall, rather than partners. Simultaneously, the presence of policymakers at CJG offices around the city was declining. This way, the slowly changing balance between equal and more hierarchical positions became visible in the meeting location.

The calibration of authority was informed to a certain degree by *structural governance arrangements*. The policy documents and performance contract emphasized collaboration and learning from practice, ruling out a strong hierarchical relationship. The lack of performance indicators and incentives further stimulated a degree of equality between the governance actors, even though it did define the municipality as commissioning partner. A formal mandate allowed the CJG decision making power. Yet, none of the documents defined rules of engagement. More importantly, the findings show that notwithstanding what might be documented and designed, authority was constantly shifted and sometimes contested. The principles of the relationship were defined in structural governance arrangements, but authority needed to be performed in interaction.

4.5 | Governance as calibration in meetings

Thus far, the analysis has shown that responsive governance is accomplished through four subpractices. This last section elucidates the entangled and iterative nature of the four subpractices. Furthermore, going beyond the subpractices, this last part of the analysis identifies the mechanisms between the actions in meetings, the meeting conventions and artifacts, and the structural governance arrangements. This results in a visualization of the practice of responsive governance in and through meetings (Figure 1).

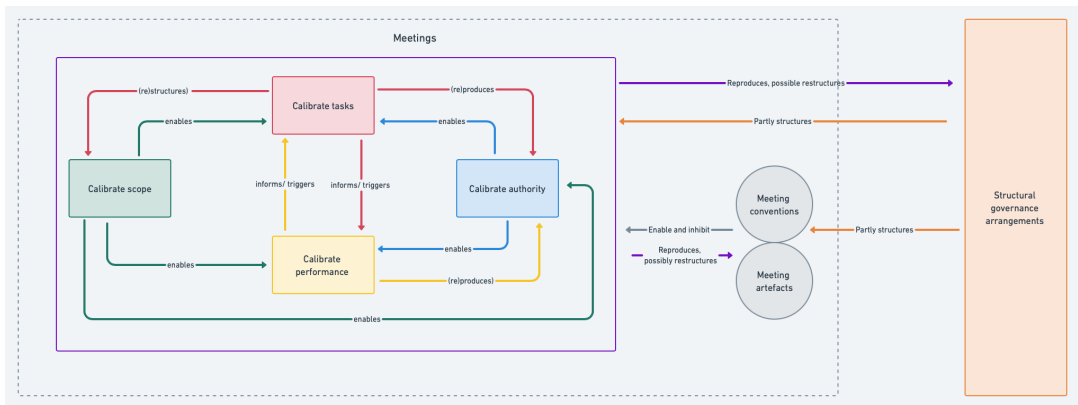


FIGURE 1 A visualization of the practice of responsive governance in and through meetings. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/padm.12943)]

The different activities of calibrating tasks, performance, scope, and authority do not represent a linear process. The calibration of tasks and performance built upon each other, as new and adjusted tasks are quickly assessed and the assessment of performance might lead to the redefinition of tasks. The calibration of scope is needed to refine and adjust tasks, just like the scope has to be redefined when tasks are adjusted. To assess performance, an understanding of the scope and interpretation of events is necessary. Through the exchanging and convincing of interpretation of events that makes the calibration of scope, positions of hierarchy become available and are negotiated. The calibration of authority is suffused throughout the other practices. In the calibration of tasks, authority is constantly negotiated, while balancing equality and hierarchy is needed to decide on tasks. A specific authority, one based on equality and collaboration, is needed to show the vulnerability that is necessary to discuss mistakes and improvements and learn thereof. While in calibrating performance, both equal and hierarchical positions are reproduced.

The aims that actors pursue in governing are partly derived from formal governance institutions and arrangements. Our findings show actors who aim to experiment, learn, adjust quickly, remain flexible. Simultaneously, we see them pragmatically dealing with the situation at hand in which they are faced with all kinds of concerns that influence their actions. In response to everyday calibration, worries surge about the ever-changing tasks and the limited resources to fulfill them, about the lack of collective memory about what has been agreed, about limited transparency and accountability, about failing recognition of the work being done and about the large amount of time that it takes. There is an inherent precariousness to the relational authority, with actors experiencing uncertainty and vulnerability in everyday calibration. Actors also have to deal with colleagues from different departments that do not have the same aims or with professionals who ask for clearer guidelines for specific parts of their task. Resultingly, in some actions actors might pursue contradictory or more practical goals, such as drafting very elaborate and fixed guidelines for specific issues or keeping mistakes to themselves rather than learning from them together.

Our analysis also reveals the relation between governance actions and meeting conventions and artifacts. Conventions and artifacts play an interesting role, mediating situated practices in meetings with structural arrangements. In the meeting context, conventions and artifacts enable and inhibit actions, while the actions in turn can reproduce but also restructure those same conventions and artifacts. The informal character of the meeting, indicated by the absence of chair, agenda, preparatory documents, and minutes and the small character of the meeting enabled a certain equality in terms of agenda-setting, turn-taking, and possibilities to negotiate. It enabled a high flexibility to include latest developments as well. Seemingly irrelevant issues of location challenged that same equality. The conventions and artifacts are also linked to the larger structure. The aim of flexibility was locally embedded through developing informal conventions and artifacts.

Everyday governing in meetings does not happen in a vacuum. It is informed—even structured by—certain structural governance arrangements. Yet, it can consecutively diverge from those arrangements, challenge them, and even change them. Responsive governance specifically includes arrangements that allow for flexibility, with provisional policy and regulatory frameworks. In addition, they in the least imply a division of authority, stressing collaboration to learn by doing. Ideally, the governance arrangements also include monitoring systems that enable learning. These arrangements in turn structure fitting meeting conventions and artifacts. The observations show that through interaction in meetings, actors then adjust, redefine, and add tasks and responsibilities. That they define, negotiate, challenge and learn from everyday practices and developments based on informal exchanges and signals, alongside monitoring systems. That—given quick developments—they need to constantly define what it is they are governing. And that they dynamically shift authority to accomplish those calibrations. Thus, structural arrangements partly inform the calibration of tasks, performance, and authority, but cannot completely define the more complex, dynamic, sometimes conflictive nature of governing responsively.

The practice of calibration in meetings can feed into existing governance arrangements. This did not happen with calibrations of scope or authority as these were fleeting practices, obsolete by the time they had been performed. These practices needed to be performed in meetings, as vital element to everyday governing, but were not formalized or documented. The calibration of tasks did regularly end up in formalized documents, such as performance contracts. This happened with large task extensions that included additional costs and projects that could be used to show the important work of the CJG. Notably, those tasks and projects had often been already implemented, as the documentation only happened on fixed moments and took much time, more than the situation generally allowed. In these cases, the structural governance documents thus functioned as an ex-post formalization and accountability of the calibrations. Lastly, the calibration of performance has a complex relation to other governance arrangements. The calibration of performance largely informed the calibration of tasks, yet in our case, this was not informed by existing monitoring systems as these were still in development. There is a potential to inform the calibration of performance concerning professional work and possibly related systemic problems in governance. Yet, monitoring systems are generally only consulted periodically, and might therefore not capture the latest developments that needed quick calibration, or specific elements that cannot be registered. Therefore, although a proper monitoring system has much potential to inform the calibration of performance, this will likely function alongside more alternative forms of calibration of performance, neither formalized nor documented.

5 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The body of literature that theorizes responsive forms of governance has been on the rise and has shown the vital role of collaboration, experimentation, learning from experience and the need to embed these in the institutional infrastructure (Ansell, 2011; Sørensen & Torfing, 2011). Understudied in the field of study is how responsive governance is brought into being through practices, and the role of meetings herein. This study has unpacked everyday practices of responsive governance of child and family services in at the local level in The Netherlands.

This article contributes to our comprehension of responsive forms of governance by situating its everyday practice in meetings. In meetings and by meeting governance actors produce and reinforce responsive governance. Responsive governance entails negotiation, experimentation and adjustment to make sure it continuous to be flexible to the situation at hand, it continues to meet current developments, it continuous to learn and improve from experience. To accomplish that, governance actors meet and interact in meetings. Meetings are “formative” and can therefore accomplish other things than performance contracts, monitoring systems, and collaborative agreements can (Freeman & Maybin, 2011; Sandler & Thedvall, 2017). Supporting previous research (Lamp, 2017), the analysis specifically shows the effects of informal meeting characteristics which enable constant monitoring, equal negotiation, the building of relationships and quick adjustments. This makes informal meetings particularly apt for responsive governance. Yet, the informal arrangements challenge transparency, continuity, and accountability. The informal is pragmatically layered and entangled with the formal (Scott, 2008), the inscribed, the visible, but tends to become unproductive. Following the work of Freeman (Freeman), I therefore believe that both governance scholars and

practitioners should start to pay attention to meetings; what is said and done in meetings, and how, where, by whom are meetings organized, regulated, documented, and their practices formalized?

A second contribution to theorizing on responsive governance can be found in a thorough understanding of the practice of governing responsively. The analysis elucidates the everyday practice through which it is accomplished. Responsive governance starts with ‘provisional’ arrangements such as an open framework of policy and regulation, collaboration agreements, and contracts that emphasize learning from experience (Ansell, 2011; Ayres & Braithwaite, 1992; Sabel & Zeitlin, 2012). Then, in interaction, the governance actors calibrate tasks, performance, scope, and authority. In these acts, governance actors continuously (re)assign and (re)define tasks, continuously assess and negotiate experiences and the norms they adhere to, continuously identify, interpret, and negotiate the object they are governing and the developments that matter to do so, and continuously (re)establish and shift the position and relation towards each other. What needs to be governed is constructed, developing an “actionable understanding” (Cook & Wagenaar, 2012; Goffman, 1959), exposing the indeterminate and relational nature of the scope of governance after the initial design phase. Actors are searching for and experimenting with their role and position in relation to the other. As the practice of authority is suffused through every action, and concerns and demands challenge the relationality between the actors, the relational authority (Ansell, 2011) becomes precarious.

Third, the article has developed an understanding of how the everyday practice of responsive governance relates to structural governance arrangements. Governance practices can reproduce or recreate the structural arrangements of responsive governance, but can challenge or change the structural contours or create variations or changes to governance that remain outside the visibility of agreements, arrangements, and architectures. This study exposes the intrinsically intertwined character of the structural elements of governance—often referred to as “formal” and “macro”—with the everyday actions of governance—often referred to as “micro” and “informal.” It provides a different understanding of the dynamics of governance; both the actions and the structural contours are constantly reproduced in (inter-)action. The structural contours of governance—being formalized contracts or meetings conventions—inform everyday (inter-)actions of governance to varying degrees (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011). Simultaneously, in these (inter-)actions, structural contours and institutional arrangements can be (re) produced, contested, undermined, or modified (Freeman, 2019; Huising & Silbey, 2011). This perception of governance also complexifies our understanding of macro and micro. The analysis of the mutual relation between governance practices and structural governance arrangements shows how seemingly “macro” and durable elements of a social or governance order can be the result of practices of local ordering (Nicolini, 2012), however powerfully constraining that order might be (Ortner, 1984).

What this study then creates is an image of the practice of responsive governance as purposeful as the actors search to—quickly—improve service delivery and its governance. The practice is, however, also pragmatic, dealing with and responding to the situation at hand, such as the challenges to continuity. The practice is contingent, as actors shift between more or less responsive action, between more or less relationality. And the practice is contested, as all kinds of actors pose demands, doubts, and concerns about more structure, more accountability, more formalization, challenging the others' authority, the norms to which to adhere, and responsiveness itself. The practice is, finally, provisional, as it remains open to interpretate the scope, performance, tasks, responsive governance itself and therewith also remains open to change. Thus, responsive governance does not only start with a provisional framework, it remains permanently provisional.

5.1 | Limitations and suggestions for further research

This ethnographic study of the responsive governance of child and family services in a local case in the Netherlands allowed the observation of the everyday practice of governing, combining and triangulating data from a multitude of actions, actors, research sites and settings and documents to build a grounded, multilayered, nuanced understanding that exposes dimensions that might remain hidden through other approaches. Although the approach was very suitable for the aim of this study, it also comes with some limitations, specifically concerning generalizability. Our

findings can therefore be insightful for other cases, but their transferability depends on similarities and differences with other research settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The researched case was suitable to answer the research question, as it exposes many key characteristics of responsive governance. Yet, certain particular characteristics might limit the transferability. For example, the large autonomy and limited monitoring of municipalities, the large mandate and short-term focus of governance actors at the local level, and the lack of hard performance measures and local monitoring likely all contributed to the specific constellation of governance practices *and* to the specific role meetings have acquired in governing. Furthermore, I observed informal meetings, providing little insight into how responsive governance is accomplished in other types of meeting. My proposal would be to take this case study as a tentative exploration and encourage additional, comparative research in other local settings, other domains, and other countries to further our understanding.

Although it might take different shapes, responsive governance needs to be brought into practice, it needs actors to keep it going, it needs their continuous work to endure. Those actions and interactions hold the possibility to reproduce, but also to challenge, disrupt, or to undo the flexible character of public governance, making not only its arrangements, but the practice itself provisional. The visualization of the everyday practice of responsive governance can serve as an analytical tool to further explore governance practices and their interconnectedness with larger governance structures. Specifically, I believe there is a need to develop a more thorough and systematic understanding of how, when, why, and by whom governance arrangements are revised. Furthermore, research could look into the different impact of formal and informal meeting practices on responsive forms of governance. Future research might also examine the relation of governance practices with the street-level, both focusing on how street-level practices and experiences inform adjustments in governance practices and arrangements and how responsive forms of governance inform street-level practices of services provision. By offering an empirically grounded understanding of the accomplishment of responsive governance in and through meetings and raising awareness of its consequences and risks, this study provides a basis to further explore these issues for both research and practice.

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The author declares no conflict of interest.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Because of the sensitive nature of the work observed, confidentiality promised to research participants, and the very limited possibility to anonymize our ethnographic data, data cannot be shared beyond what appears in the manuscript and supplementary material.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The data obtained in this paper is in line with Dutch research law and regulations and did not need formal ethics approval at the time of research.

CONSENT STATEMENT

The organization and the research participants have given verbal consent, in line with research regulation at the time of research. More details about data collection can be found in the method section.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ For child protection services and personal budgeting options, national regulation was more defined and confined.
- ² The municipality provides a legal mandate to the CJG without the necessity for a formal government decision or a formal control on family treatment plans and corresponding allocation and expenditures.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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