

What are we working for?" How community professionals are handling challenges of professional legitimacy in the context of shifting professional responsibilities

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Background

In Dutch community-development practices, a major shift has been manifesting itself the last five years, whereby practitioners are pushed towards more instrumental community-based approaches. In practice, the professional mission of community work has thus evolved from supporting the social and cultural literacy of disadvantaged social groups into stimulating voluntary involvement of citizens, for instance in providing concrete social support of vulnerable people.

Research/method

Currently, a study combining field research with action research is being conducted in Bos en Lommer, an active, culturally diverse neighbourhood in Amsterdam. The focus is on the daily practices of nine community-development professionals: their interaction with neighbourhood representatives, active citizens, local officials and other professionals such as social work, care, and safety.

Firstly, this study is exploring the challenges these community professionals are facing, now that their traditional professional position is being scrutinized. For instance, the question is being addressed how community practitioners are redefining their position in communities from a profession representing government interest in empowering vulnerable citizens towards a profession that functions as a broker between local supply and demand in social support. This shift in professional position is being framed as a problem of 'strategic professional legitimacy', a concept derived from legitimacy theory. Based on an extensive study of the community-development literature regarding similar processes in other Western welfare states (2008-2013), the expectation is that issues will arise with regard to firstly establishing professional credibility and secondly securing continuity in active as well as in passive support. These challenges will become visible as they are forced to develop new forms of partnerships with active citizens and practitioners in care and welfare at a neighborhood level.

Secondly, a study actively involving the aforementioned community practitioners is running along with the field study. Hereby the focus is on developing theory-based reflective strategies that could support community workers to establishing new professional mandates in Bos en Lommer. A series of six theory-based reflective sessions is being organized, applying as