

# THE POTENTIAL THEORETICAL EFFECTS OF STRUCTURED DIALOGUE IN PUBLIC RESEARCH FUNDING PROCESSES: ILLUSTRATED WITH A MEDICAL RESEARCH CASE FROM A HIGH-INCOME COUNTRY IN EUROPE

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## ABSTRACT

*European medical research projects are becoming increasingly diverse and international. Researchers are encouraged to engage with stakeholders in society to ensure that research and innovation make substantive contributions to societal well-being. The medical and social cost of dementia for society is higher than for cancer, but dementia researchers are awarded only a fraction of the cancer research funding amount. This theoretical study, accompanied by an empirical case from a high-income country in Europe, suggests that public research funding models do not align the medical research objectives of policymakers, public decision-makers and executing researchers and that the introduction of structured dialogue between the parties can mitigate this misalignment. This impacts the research in less mature sciences, such as dementia research, more negatively. Implementation of structured dialogue in the public research funding processes will reduce stakeholder tensions and improve the achievement of the participating parties' objectives. Structured dialogue can be implemented through a proven World Café dialogue method.*

**Keywords** - public research funding, dialogue, document analysis, dementia, world café.

## INTRODUCTION

Researchers are encouraged to engage with stakeholders outside the research community (Carrier and Gartzlaff 2020). This was in line with the European Commission's introduction of Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI) as an administrative framework to ensure that research and innovation activities make substantive contributions to societal well-being (Von Schomberg 2013). The underlying concern of RRI policy is the perceived loss of societal control over science and innovation despite increased public funding. The researchers' focus on scientific excellence and the public innovation policy's emphasis on competitiveness was considered to pose a risk of neglecting the social value of

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research and innovation. RRI suggests that responsible researchers should communicate with their stakeholders to secure social support and facilitate social guidance for their endeavors (Owen, Macnaghten, and Stilgoe 2012).

A basic communication model was introduced after World War II and remains relevant today (Claude Elwood Shannon 1948; Claude E Shannon and Weaver 1964). This model starts with a "source" defining a "message" to communicate. The message is then transmitted through a "channel" appropriate for the "audience", allowing for non-linear feedback. Later, in the 1970s, marketing and political science studies showed that more than message-based communication is needed for changing policy. To be effective, the message must be aligned with three additional "streams" to create a temporal "window of opportunity" for change: The specific problem must be defined, political solutions to the problem must be developed, and there must be a political/public interest in the issue (Brownson et al. 2018; Kingdon and Stano 1984).

Communicating with policymakers and public decision-makers is not only complicated, with many stakeholder groups and activities involved, but research communication is also complex, with uncertain and emergent actions and results (Rogers 2008). A literature review presents a wide variety of opinions, vague advice and techniques on how to communicate to influence policy at a general stakeholder level. There is little evidence of how research is used in policy and public decision-making, and the evidence of policymakers not allocating public research funding based on defined societal needs (Oliver and Cairney 2019; Otten et al. 2015; Viergever 2013).

Another layer of research funding complexity is globalization of health research. Public health research funding is organized and managed differently around the world, also with respect to who decides the priorities and how they allocate the funds (Viergever and Hendriks 2016). The researchers and research projects receiving the funds are increasingly more diverse, with a wider range of international participation (Gök, Rigby, and Shapira 2016).

Dialogue can be appropriate in complex situations and relationships (Ropers 2004). Policymakers prefer face-to-face dialogue with trustworthy researchers, particularly when time is of the essence (Haynes et al. 2012).

An understanding of leading research funding distribution mechanisms and their impacts on public funding institutions and the respective researchers have been studied (Abudu, Oliver, and Boaz 2022; Bloch, Graversen, and Pedersen 2014b; Gök, Rigby, and Shapira 2016; Guba, Zheleznov, and Chechik 2023; Kaló et al. 2019; Zacharewicz et al. 2019), but policy setting and alignment of objectives from public policy through public funding institution to the executing researcher are not well described (Viergever and Hendriks 2016).

### **The problem and aim**

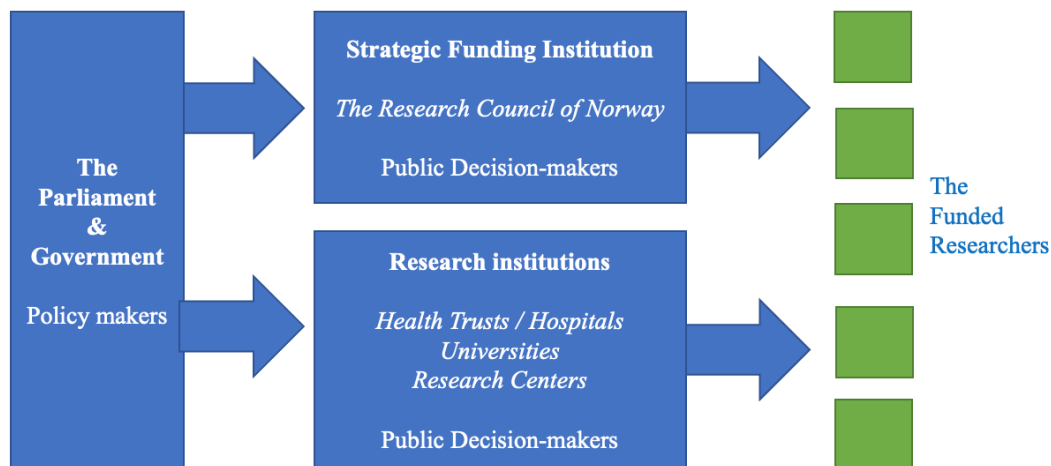
Dementia is the leading cause of death in the UK and the seventh largest cause of death in the world, but is the only leading cause of death with no medical evidence of safe and long-term prevention or cure (Alzheimer's Research UK 2023; World Health Organiza-

tion 2022; Livingston et al. 2024). Nevertheless, medical research has identified 14 actions which may prevent or delay the onset of dementia diseases. These are: Ensure good quality education, make hearing aids accessible, treat depression, use head protection in contact sports, encourage exercise, reduce cigarette smoking, prevent/reduce hypertension, detect and treat high LDL cholesterol, maintain a healthy weight, reduce high alcohol consumption, reduce social isolation, identify and reduce vision loss and reduce exposure to air pollution (Livingston et al. 2024). In high-income countries, dementia diseases have a medical cost higher than cancer and heart diseases combined (Luengo-Fernandez, Leal, and Gray 2015; Oslo Economics 2016; A.E. Skogli et al. 2019; E. Skogli et al. 2020), but receive two and a half times less research funding than cancer (Alzheimer's Research UK 2024), despite reputable institutions and governments have presented facts and statistics demonstrating a significant public need for more and better dementia research (World Health Organization 2022). Despite a 40-year research history, dementia research is a relatively less developed science where research has been riddled with failures (Khachaturian 2018). The negative trend will tend to persist due to policy and institutional inertia (Beyer 2010; Greener 2005; Laird 2020), and there is little evidence of public health research being allocated in accordance with standardized definitions of national and/or international public health needs (Viergever 2013; Babashahi, Hansen, and Sullivan 2021; World Health Organization 2020, 2024), and dementia researcher mirrors this by actively pursuing their own individual objectives (FUSDahl et al. 2023). Overcoming the negative path requires internal operational change and "discussion formats that transcend origin institutions and hierarchies" (Hanger-Kopp et al. 2022).

This paper argues that structured dialogue between the policy makers, public funding decision-makers and researchers receiving public research funding should be implemented to motivate more alignment of the parties' objectives and improve transparency of public research funding distribution.

The aim of this article is to investigate how the structure and governing principles of public research funding limit the exchange of human and ethical alignment of objectives in the public research funding value chain and how systematic introduction of dialogue between the individual persons in public research processes can have an impact (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: The public research funding value chain in a high-income country: Norway**



Source: Ministry of Education and Research 2022b, 2022a; Ministry of Health and Care Services 2024

Face-to-face dialogue can promote a better understanding of participating parties' objectives, more voluntary cooperation and lead to research performance above expectations - particularly in a less developed science like brain and dementia research (W.C. Kim and Mauborgne 2003; Levinas and Nemo 1985). Therefore, we want to explore how such dialogue can have an effect on the public research funding "value chain" from policy to research execution, rather than assuming that persons engaging in public sector communication have an updated and working understanding of the range of relevant institutional values ("publicness" of public sector organizations) and objectives of the applicable to the policymakers and public decisions-makers (Luoma-aho and Canel 2020, 4).

Dialogue among stakeholders in public management is recognized in the scientific literature as an effective means of enhancing decision-making processes and policy outcomes. Deliberative democracy theories suggest that dialogue leverages collective intelligence by integrating diverse viewpoints and expertise to more informed and comprehensive decisions related to complex public challenges (Mendonça, Ercan, and Asenbaum 2022). Dialogue can also strengthen relationships among stakeholders through open and transparent communication to promote cooperation and successful policy implementation (Jager et al. 2020). Moreover, face-to-face communication serves as a mechanism for conflict resolution and consensus building, enabling stakeholders with differing interests to negotiate, address underlying issues, and collaboratively develop sustainable solutions (Meijer and De Jong 2020). Dialogue between stakeholders has the capacity to enhance the legitimacy and democratic accountability of public decisions, thereby suggesting increased public acceptance and support (Røiseland 2022). Lastly, dialogue can support systems thinking by enabling stakeholders to collaboratively explore interdependencies and broader implications of policy decisions, which is crucial for addressing multifaceted issues in public management (Lutz-Ley et al. 2021). Collectively, in an anticipatory perspective, these arguments suggest that dialogue can have a role in achieving effective, legitimate, and sustainable outcomes in public research funding processes.

The study includes an empirical case with a strategic and dedicated government research funding institution to illustrate the theoretical argument in an operational context. It is beyond the scope of this study to include public intramural research institutions such as regional health trusts and their affiliated university hospitals that have multiple strategies, such as specialist health services, education, research and other services connected to this.

## METHODS

This is a multi-method study, with theoretical analysis and document analysis. It is a theoretical study of how dialogue can be used as a tool for promoting collaboration and alignment of party interests in public research funding. Dialogue will be discussed in a philosophical context based on the works of Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975), Martin Buber (1878-1965), Emmanuel Lévinas (1906-1995), Robert Roberts (1942- ) and Peter Hacker (1939- ), who are philosophers of dialogue, narrative and ethics. Thereafter, an implementation of structured dialogue is discussed in a management theory perspective; "Fair Process" developed by prof. Chan Kim and prof. Renée Mauborgne at INSEAD Business School, France (Kim and Mauborgne 1997).

Although the funding allocation mechanisms in the different countries are diverse, the common denominators are that public health funding is predominantly allocated to project and individual grant funding based on excellence, with an international and cross-institutional composition (Viergever and Hendriks 2016). To reduce the vagueness in the applicability of dialogue we illustrate the use of dialogue in a Norwegian high-income country context.

The Norwegian case is included as a means to achieve international generalizability through analytical generalization (Buchanan and Bryman 2009) based on four arguments. First, the nuances of Norwegian public research funding may be case-specific, but the policy funding and distribution mechanism follows the separation of legislative and executive powers in many states. Secondly, healthcare research funding is unevenly allocated to high-income countries (Kaló et al. 2019) with extensive research collaborations with Norway (Balland, Boschma, and Ravet 2019). Third, the research itself is increasingly international (Gök, Rigby, and Shapira 2016).

The Norwegian case is developed with inspiration from document analysis using public documents generated through an online snowball sampling method. The document review was analytical-inductive. The document analysis was based on principles set forth in *Kvalitative Metoder*, chapter 7, by Kenneth Lynggaard (Brinkmann and Tanggaard 2020, 185-202). Central documents are referred to in the article, and key points from the document analysis are illustrated by text quotations. The reviewed documents included secondary governing documents made available by the Norwegian Government, Norwegian public research funding institutions and European Commission documents. A secondary document is defined herein as documents publicly available on Government/European Commission webpages. No confidential or private documents (primary documents) have been included in the document analysis. The reviewed secondary documents follow the chain-of-command from the Government ministries to the Norwegian strategic public research funding institution (Research Council of Norway) and onwards to the

executing researchers (Figure 1). The Government issued documents are key policy documents and key Government steering documents for Norwegian public management. The Norwegian public funding institutions are funded by 13 different Norwegian ministries, and the documents reviewed included a cross-section of documents from these ministries to reinforce the validity of the findings. Investigations of possible informal/ad-hoc communication channels within the public research funding value chain were considered to be beyond the scope of this study.

### **A HIGH-INCOME COUNTRY RESEARCH FUNDING STRUCTURE**

The Norwegian Government allocates funding to public medical research through annual capital allocations to its strategic research funding institution, Research Council of Norway, (RCN) and the operating budgets of public research institutions (e.g. regional health trusts, university hospitals, universities and research centers). These institutions are managed by the Ministry of Research and Higher Education and the Ministry of Health and Care Services, respectively. The Government funds research through the annual National Budget, and the public funding institutions allocate research funding to researchers on a competitive tender basis. Private funding is very limited compared to a predominantly publicly funded medical research in Norway (Oslo Economics 2023). In 2023, the Minister of Research and Higher Education stated in a press conference that the Norwegian public research model was due for an "extreme makeover" (Tønnesen et al. 2023) - a 30 years Norwegian public funding model was in play.

This situation encourages a hypothesis; that the current public research model may lead to unintended effects on the allocation process for public research funding. We have reviewed key steering documents applicable to the allocating institutions for public research funding to frame the context of the public research funding "value chain", and to describe the institutional structure in which policymakers, the political decision-makers and the executing researchers are allowed to communicate to share knowledge and know-how for their respective research funding decisions.

Public health, execution of health services and medical research are managed through management by objectives ("MBO") principles (The Norwegian Government 2023; Ministry of Health and Care Services 2022; Ministry of Education and Research 2022c). This management has resulted in a wealth of "loud" voices in the public, displaying mistrust, political power play, and public bad-naming (Svartstad 2023).

The public funding institutions, including the RCN, are funded by 13 different Government ministries. The institutions are governed by articles of association and annual mandates in respective "letters of allocation" to RCN (Ministry of Education and Research 2023b) and "mission documents" to the regional health trusts (Ministry of Health and Care Services 2023).

The steering documents governing the public funding of medical research do not mention personal dialogue or alignment of roles and objectives for Norwegian public research. The funding institutions report to their principals in the public hierarchy and to the appli-



cable ministries through a formalized "steering dialogue" which is based on written reports and formal institutional meetings (The Norwegian Government 2022). In the case of RCN, communication with the principal (The Ministry of Education and Research), is specified to be by written reports and monological presentation of predetermined agenda items at annual meetings. Thus, open agenda items ("Any other business") are not allowed in the governing documents for RCN. Moreover, the governing guidelines limit the "dialogue" between the parties to monological instructions and monological meetings, both between the policymakers to the political decision-makers, and between the political decision-makers and the executing researchers as monological competitive bids, with formal "calls for proposals" and compliant grant applications.

The competitive tendering instructions are detailed and monological. The prequalification and evaluation procedures are strict. Non-compliance to any tendering instructions results in direct disqualification, without dialogue, regardless of any evaluation of the tender application content (The Research Council of Norway 2023). By construct, the tendering researchers have no personal counterparty in the funding institution, but a digital institutional website. When public funding is awarded, the monologic, non-personal and institutional communication is continued throughout the execution phase, when research progress and any deviations from an application plan shall be reported periodically to the funding institution.

Although, the steering documents specify funding allocations through "competitive bids", more dialogical tendering formats like "competitive negotiated procedure" or "competitive dialogue" are not used by the public funding institutions. In competitive negotiated procedures, anyone may ask to participate, but only those who are pre-selected will be invited to submit initial tenders and to negotiate (Your Europe 2022).

Despite having the option to do so, neither RCN nor regional health authorities report of any planned dialogues with researchers outside the formal funding tendering processes or public hearing processes (Research Council of Norway 2022; Helse Vest 2023), and the evaluations are rare. RCN had a sector evaluation report in 2010/2011 of biology, medicine and health sciences. A new evaluation report covering medicine and health sciences is due in 2024, but with a strictly formal mandate (The Research Council of Norway 2022) and with self-nominated members.

RCN has a deciding role in allocating research funding. Despite this, the management responsibility of RCN is specifically isolated by the Government to RCN's direct operational actions only. Notably, RCN is not responsible for any effects the publicly funded research has on society, as this is considered outside RCN's control. The Government's reasoning of such ring-fenced responsibility is that RCN shall focus on "contribute to more effective public management, through improved goal achievement and a steering dialogue that focuses on the effects from RCN's activities" (author's translation) (The Norwegian Government 2022, 2).

Improvement of the public research funding model and alignment of objectives are discussed in the Government white paper, long-term plan for research and higher education 2023–2032 (Ministry of Education and Research 2022b, 73). However, the Government

is satisfied with the current research quality in Norway based on a top quartile research publication volume:

"Overall, the research quality is good. Norway is ranked number 10 in the world's 43 top nations measured in publication volume. Norway's researchers do very well in the EU."

and the report states, without further deliberations that the competitive tendering model is a reason for research quality:

"Competition-based schemes managed by the Research Council are important for ensuring high quality and for gearing research towards the knowledge needs in different sectors of society." (Ministry of Education and Research 2022b, 76)

This Government claim is not in line with a recent study in *Nature* (Park, Leahey, and Funk 2023) with respect to life science research, which concludes that the number of research papers in life sciences is increasing exponentially, but the papers have had a steady falling disruptive quality for decades. Adding to the falling disruptive quality, the growth in number of papers is based on a narrower base of knowledge. The variation of citations in life sciences papers is smaller and the cited works are older than before. Furthermore, the language used in life sciences papers is less diversified and the number of self-citations is increasing.

It is beyond the scope of this study to consider the reasons for these declining trends, but previous studies suggest that more experienced researchers, with earlier funding success, tend to receive more funding than others (Bloch, Graversen, and Pedersen 2014a). The *Nature* study demonstrate that more dialogical collaboration is needed in research to increase research quality:

"To promote disruptive science and technology, scholars may be encouraged to read widely and given time to keep up with the rapidly expanding knowledge frontier. Universities may forgo the focus on quantity, and more strongly reward research quality [...] Federal agencies may invest in the riskier and longer-term individual awards that support careers and not simply specific projects, giving scholars the gift of time needed to step outside the fray, inoculate themselves from the publish or perish culture, and produce truly consequential work."

In October 2021, it was publicly announced that public "call for proposal" from the RCN would not be financed by the Norwegian Government in the National Budget. For the Norwegian public, this was the starting point of a research policy change that would shake the research community for the months ahead.

The RCN management did not comment on the political "budget surprise", but the RCN board of directors wrote a formal letter to the Ministry that they disagreed with the Government action taken (Khrono.no 2023). The ministry reacted to the board's disagreement with a warning to RCN. In a formal meeting, RCN was instructed not to act politically; all public hearings by RCN now required prior notification to the Ministry (Trædal 2021a).



RCN management explained that they had acted on political "signals" of an expected budget allocation in the National Budget, and that this was necessary to be able to grant public research funding to typical multi-year research projects.

The unexpected shortfall of RCN funding impacted the researchers directly. Months of grant application work was in vain, and they were upset (Trædal 2021c). A university professor stated to the largest national newspaper that the situation was "unacceptable" (Trædal 2021b).

A few months later, May 2022, the Minister of Education and Research replaced the existing 11 board members with five new members. Moreover, RCN was ordered to stop deploying research funding, and an external audit was ordered by the Government. The Minister of Education and Research announced that more Government control would be implemented (Jørgen Svarstad og Julia Loge 2022) with formal steps to give the ministry direct operational control of RCN (Ministry of Education and Research 2023a). The new long-term strategy to reorganize the Norwegian research structure was now due before the next Parliament election in 2025 (Ministry of Education and Research 2022b):

"The Government believes that it is time to review the research system to assess whether changes are needed that can make optimal contribution to achieving research policy objectives" (Ministry of Education and Research 2022b, 73).

The Minister of Education and Research confirmed this in January 2023 when he presented his 15 actions for an "extreme makeover" of the Norwegian public research (Tønnesen et al. 2023).

## THE DIALOGICAL IDEA

An introduction of personal dialogue and sharing of narratives in the public research funding value chain would not be a new concept to public management but it is rare (Luomaaho and Canel 2020, 6), but a novel change in public management of research funding. Dialogue, spoken or silent, opens for genuine and real communication between people across the institutions to explore ways forward, which benefit all participating parties. Such personal encounters help establishing meaningful connections with the other persons in public research, both on the funding and the executing side, to create a shared understanding of public research in practice. It is such sense of collaboration and empathy between the individual researchers and public officials that can lead to transformative change (Sheremata 2000), in contrast to the current monological connection, where the persons involved treat each other as third parties, objects, or means to an end.

### The three types of communication

We have three different types of communication between people. First, we have the technical and objective exchange of monologues. Second, the negotiating expression of thoughts to "strike home in the sharpest way" or, third, the genuine dialogue intending to find common ground between persons where the focus is to establish a personal, authentic encounter with another person to achieve an alignment of goals in a balanced and equitable manner (Buber 2002, 22-23).

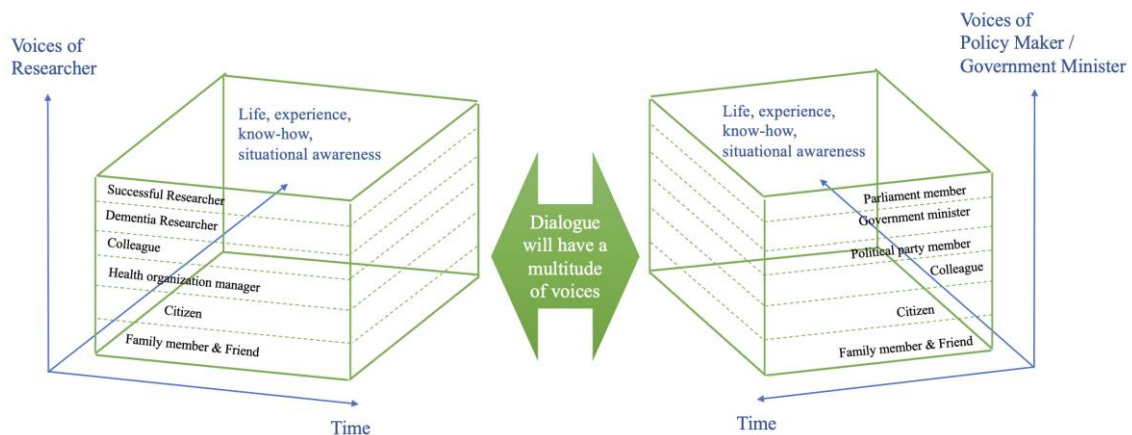
The latter form of dialogue contrasts significantly with the monological exchange of information where individual self-interest and lack of collaboration hinder achievements of common goals. On the face of it, the second form of expression may seem relational and collaborative but hidden interests and lack of genuine interest in the other persons' objectives may limit the ability and willingness to achieve mutual gains and achievements of objectives. Thus, if the goal is to seek the best contribution to achieving public research policy objectives, then the third type of dialogue should be pursued. An introduction of genuine dialogue in the Norwegian research funding value chain would be a contrast to the current hierarchal discourse, where communication and relationships are more coordinated through monologues and written exchanges (Brennan, Kuhlen, and Charoy 2018). The key differences in introducing genuine dialogue lie in the motivating honest perceptions of the parties and the willingness to participate in the lives of the other people they relate to in the public funding processes.

### **The multitude (polyphony) of voices in communication**

The Russian philosopher Bakhtin adds a nuanced view on dialogue. He argued that communication between people is inherently dialogical, and that such dialogue involves a constant interface of a multitude of different voices and perspectives. This "polyphony" of voices, tones of voices, body language and silence, where "two embodied meanings cannot lie side by side like two objects - they must come into inner contact; that is, they must enter into a semantic bond" (Emerson and Holquist 1984, 189).

The dialogue can develop differently in a setting where the public decision-makers juggle different roles in their lives: A bureaucrat representing the institutional interests of the government may be more nervous than before after the Minister of Education and Research announced an "extreme makeover" of public research; a young ambitious employee could be afraid of making a mistake to get a long wanted promotion; or being a mother or father worried about a sick child. Parliament members and elected government officials may be affected by a variety of incentives, the media, a re-election, political recognition, party politics or maybe family and friends, to name a few. Likewise, dementia researchers may have a current juggle of interests related to grants, publications, institutional management, other leading scholars or his family and friends (Figure 2) (Brownson et al. 2006). We will not know specifically how the multitude of personal roles could affect the communication and collaboration. It is, however, reasonable to anticipate that a formal written mandate letter will be perceived differently than a personal meeting where the public officials and researcher connect with a welcoming smile and a friendly personal tone of voice, allowing for meaningful silence and utterances while recognizing that the other person is listening.

**Figure 2: The public research funding value chain in a high-income country: Norway**



Source: own illustration

Due to the multitude of roles and voices, a dialogical setting can, therefore, not be expected to offer immediate clarity of the other persons' intentions and meanings. However, this is the core of the dialogical benefits to the research ecosystem. "Only in communication, in the interaction of one person with another, can the man in man be revealed, for others as well as for oneself. [...] Dialogue is not the threshold to action, it is the action itself" (Emerson and Holquist 1984, 252). Thus, it is through dialogue the policymakers and political decision-makers can fund the appropriate researchers and the funded researchers have insights and understanding to develop their research to achieve common goals and in an equitable manner.

These variations and combinations of roles and voices throughout the institutional value chain of research stakeholders from the Parliament, Government, ministry, strategic funding institution, and the research team are personal and without limits, and there is no arena today to share and see these roles and voices in the public research value-chain.

### **The maturity of science and the need for dialogue**

Dialogue would provide better understanding of the different requirements for facilitating better research, also with respect to the maturity of the sciences. Some sciences are mature, with a high level of specificity, while other are "less developed" and more open to significant scientific leaps. Maturity is a key issue when Nobel laureate Edvard Moser describes brain research:

"In particle physics, we know a lot more and have clear predictions, so we can have large, joint critical studies. In brain research we are not able to formulate such critical research yet. However, it is possible to plan and facilitate for the unexpected." (Forskerforum 2022; author's translation)

Within clinical research, cancer research is more mature than dementia research and has a higher success rate than dementia research (Khachaturian 2018). This could be a contributing factor to cancer research receiving five times more research funding than dementia research (Alzheimer's Research UK 2024), despite dementia diseases having

higher medical and social costs than cancer and heart diseases combined (Luengo-Fernandez, Leal, and Gray 2015), and despite the World Health Organization concluding that dementia research is "chronically underfunded" (World Health Organization 2022, 9). Facts are available to the political decision-makers, but to little avail. Dementia research receives little political and policy attention. Sharing insights from personal encounters with dementia patients, ongoing research and new public health opportunities could offer an understanding of how dementia research could be more politically attractive and prioritized by policymakers than today.

Researchers and political decision-makers base their decisions on different characteristics. Researchers strive to argue systematically with detailed knowledge, while political decision making is engaged in more selling, arguing and compromising processes, where public opinion and personal stories are more important (Brownson et al. 2006). Dialogue can connect a series of past events and future actions to form political and scientific narratives to inspire the allocation of research funding differently from today through the sharing of knowledge, know-how, ideas and perceptions. One example of this: Is the Government aware that currently approved drugs can have positive medical effects on preventing and treating dementia, but not tested due to lack of funding to perform a review of intellectual property rights? (Cummings, Kinney, and Fillit 2022). Dialogue offers an opportunity to gain a deeper appreciation of the complexity of the other party's ethics, needs, and priorities and learn to see the world from multiple perspectives (Roberts 2012). "Narratives may promote change, and indeed, sometimes are more effective than other means of doing so" (Baldwin 2015). Today, the lack of dialogue in the public funding process offers little opportunity to provide mutual insights to develop a political understanding and the need for increased brain health research. This has a particularly negative effect on future brain health research as this is a less mature research field in need of disruptive research findings.

The narrative power was displayed to the Norwegian public in 2023 when the Norwegian public broadcasting company, NRK, aired a TV series about a group of persons with dementia diseases preparing for a public concert. The TV series got high reviews (IMDb 2023). Dementia diseases and people affected by it received nationwide media coverage. Instantly, the TV series became a shared, positive reference point for discussion and dialogue in the dementia research community and people working with funding, allowing a more timely, nuanced view of the reasoning behind the personal stakeholders' "action, intention, desire, thoughts and emotion" (Roberts 2012).

## DIALOGUE FOR THE FUTURE

Bakhtin reminds us that it is important to meet in person when we communicate. This embodies the persons' voices and perspectives and shapes a dialogue. The French/Jewish moral philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas (1906-1995) elaborates on how personal meetings are empowering the dialogue (Levinas and Nemo 1985), as the personal meetings help enforce an ethical wish of responsible action from the face-to-face encounter with the person you meet (the "Other"). This can be of great benefit in a situation where the ethics

are different in politics, bureaucracy and research (Lundquist 1988). Such personal encounters have the potential of stripping away the objectifying and institutional character of the persons involved in dementia research and its funding, e.g. it is no longer a bureaucrat meeting a researcher but two individuals seeking ethical behavior through a common recognition of the need to mitigate the adverse effects chronic underfunding of "one of the greatest health challenges of our generation" (World Health Organization 2022, 9).

A dialogue with a small number of researchers will allow structured feedback to elected officials to help make informed decisions and effectively mitigate the lack of current venues for research narratives needed in the political ecosystem (Brownson et al. 2006). This is in stark contrast to the current research funding model, where researchers and elected public officials have no established platform of dialogue available beyond the formal and monological exchange of utterances.

A starting point could be to explore venues where the respective parties can meet physically to share and listen to the insights of others' different roles - and engage in their different perspectives as politicians, bureaucrats, and executing researchers. The recent experience by RCN demonstrates that an introduction of personal dialogue and sharing of narrative could be an attractive source of information to reduce the need to act on vague "signals" from the politicians and reduce the potential misalignments of thoughts, perceptions and objectives in the public research funding process by providing new and attractive narratives (Brownson et al. 2006).

The dialogues can be arranged in smaller groups but organized on a larger scale if needed. Different dialogue methods could be appropriate to facilitate and encourage face-to-face dialogue. An established dialogue method is the "World Café" method. World Café dialogue is a structured conversational method designed to facilitate open, collaborative discussions between diverse stakeholders by simulating the informal atmosphere of an informal café. The participants engage in multiple rounds of small-group conversations, typically rotating between four-person tables to inspire an exchange ideas and insights. As the participants move from table to table in a pre-planned sequence to allow all participants to meet, a table host may remain at the respective tables to summarize previous discussions for newcomers. This approach fosters inclusive dialogue, active listening, and creative thinking. By creating a relaxed environment that diminishes hierarchical barriers, the World Café encourages equal participation, enabling stakeholders to uncover underlying assumptions, challenge conventional thinking, and co-create innovative solutions (The World Café Community Foundation 2024). The method is participatory and facilitates mutual learning. (Löhr, Weinhardt, and Sieber 2020), and has been proven successful with respect to bringing policymakers together with other societal stakeholders for conversations of change efforts (Bumble and Carter 2021). It is particularly prudent in settings where the intentions are to explore improvements of which requires a greater overview and deep insights (Recchia et al. 2022). The World Café method is not new, but in fact implemented as a dialogue tool in public institutions in the EU and Norway (The Norwegian Agency for Public and Financial Management (DFØ) 2023; URBACT 2023). The World Café concept is based on seven principles: (1) set the context; (2) create hospitable space; (3) explore questions that matter; (4) encourage everyone's contribution;



(5) cross-pollinate and connect diverse perspectives; (6) listen together for patterns, insights, and deeper questions; and (7) harvest and share collective discoveries (Brown 2010), but World Café organizers are encouraged to adapt the dialogue events to fit the specific event (Bumble and Carter 2021).

"There is something in the World Café process that being self-righteous and positional really false. Perhaps it's that there's no space for high horses and grandstanding when you're sitting talking together with four people at a small table with flowers and candles...It's almost like a collective sigh of relief happens in that second round of conversation, when people realize that everyone on that room is actually having a genuine conversation, too." (Brown 2010, 110)

The World Café concept speeds up the exchange of information and gathering of exploratory data significantly between the different knowledge practices of researchers and practitioners, such as policymakers and public decision-makers, compared to other information gathering methods such as expert interviews, Delphi and focus groups (Schiele et al. 2022). In addition, and importantly for public research funding, World Café offers a significant improvement in strategic planning capability compared to more conventional workshop settings (Chang and Chen 2015).

Although the World Café format works, the dialogical approach to improving public research funding requires the willingness of the participating individuals to engage in an open and honest communication beyond stating generic and objective pieces of institutional statements. Reaching a consensus of ideas, or even recognition of an issue itself, can be challenging in settings where there are both open and tacit conflicting goals, values, priorities or interests. Building on physical face-to-face encounters between the persons involved would promote a more honest and open-minded dialogue (Levinas and Nemo 1985). In the case of dementia research, such face-to-face dialogue may prove particularly useful, as the differences in decision-making are very different in politics and research in general (Brownson et al. 2006), but particularly in a less developed and less understood science like dementia research (Forskerforum 2022).

## DIALOGICAL CHALLENGES

Power dynamics can be present in any dialogue, and some voices can be more dominant than others (Kim and Mauborgne 1997). In the public funder/executing researcher relationship, there is a hierarchal asymmetry, where the researcher has an inherent interest in pleasing the politicians/ public decision-makers of the public institutions with authority to secure research funding and support the livelihoods and careers of the participating researchers (Luoma-aho and Canel 2020, 2). In this case, dialogical openness and honesty by the participants will be challenging if the dialogue is perceived as a threat or inappropriate for current and future fundraising. The researchers may have some balancing power in terms of offering research that has political relevance and attractiveness. It is important for the dialogue that the researcher is - and continues to be perceived as an engaged, trustworthy and understanding partner (Haynes et al. 2012). These personal traits can be argued to fit the hierarchal power asymmetry similar to the asymmetry between the policymakers and the public decision-makers. The example of recent political changes in



RCN demonstrates that making decisions and/or voicing opinions contrary to the interests of the policymakers are indeed associated with significant personal and institutional risks.

Care should be given to being open about the asymmetry and contradiction in power, and avoid a dialogical approach where the parties' institutional and personal interests neither are evaded nor masked to manipulate the dialogical outcomes. It is important to facilitate that all voices are heard and balanced to the best of the parties' individual and public interests, particularly considering less powerful and underrepresented parties who may offer insights into disruptive research and results (Park, Leahey, and Funk 2023). Communication and decision-making in research, politics and bureaucracy have their respective differences. Researchers are trained to test and argue based on systematic sampling and experiments, while policymakers are more relating to a political landscape and stakeholder management. A part of an honest dialogue includes being aware and respecting that policymakers, public decision-makers and researchers are "travelers in parallel universes" (Brownson et al. 2006). A study from Denmark shows that, public decision-makers in the bureaucratic institutions can be inclined to execute political requests, even if the legality is questioned or the bureaucratic institution believes it is not a preferred action (Tynell 2014). Thus, the language, dialogue and narratives should be expected to be challenging, with an entanglement of voices, roles, emotions, ethics and values which may prove to be difficult to navigate.

Contemporary philosophy supports the idea of introducing dialogue in a hierarchal structure, such as the public research funding value chain, but does not hide that the polyphony of voices, roles and expressions can be a source of misunderstanding and bad emotions. (Hacker 2017).

Another challenge is that dialogue requires time and effort to establish meaningful relationships and to understand the diverse perspectives of the participants. A dialogical approach can be complex and time-consuming, particularly when dealing with complex issues such as public funding. It may be unrealistic that the bureaucrat and researcher will be willing to prioritize time, efforts and resources in an already busy schedule, if there is no good, a priori, answer to each one's question of "What's in it for me?" (FUSDahl et al. 2023). However, if applied, World Cafe participants do enjoy the dialogical process as a "rewarding" learning event (Schiele et al. 2022).

## SO WHAT?

This study leads up to a claim that an enhanced and structured dialogue between the individuals involved in the allocation of public health research funding. Circling back to the fundamental model of communication, we have established that the sources, messages and audiences are many and emerging. The current channels of communication and dialogue are random at best. Introducing structured dialogue in public research funding processes would be a novel channel for public collaboration and mutual benefits.

Although this study argues that there is a logic model where structured dialogue offers opportunities for windows of opportunity for real and transformative change to improve research impact in line with socially accepted ends, we recognize that such results are

likely to take time and require continued dialogue over time. Small initial alignments of objectives can motivate the parties to build trustworthy relationships and move beyond short-term, linear gains to recursive causality with attractive tipping points towards better public health.

A political initiative to change the public research funding model is, therefore, timely. Philosophers have for decades argued that dialogue is effective. Corporate managers rely on an organizational dialogue every day to achieve objectives and shareholders' expectations.

Structured dialogue in the public research funding process opens for a better common understanding of the policymakers, political decision-makers and researchers' needs. This allows for improved scientific and political decision-making. The dialogue objectives would be to achieve more political, bureaucratic, and personal research goals, while improving the policymakers' recognition among their opinion leaders and benefiting their public standing. A fully financed and targeted research can be more focused and improve the researchers' production and quality.

Thus, a novel introduction of dialogue in public research funding is not likely to be a "silver bullet" for immediate mutual understanding, but adding personal dialogue, eg in a World Cafe format, between the policymakers, public decision-makers and the executing researchers will be a better option than the current monological and hierarchal discourse. This dialogical argument is supported by management theories, such as "Fair Process", where dialogue is strategically used to gather other people's views and explain decisions and how these will work going forward. Structured dialogue increases trust and commitment from the individuals involved and motivates voluntary cooperation to deliver results exceeding expectations and defined objectives (Kim and Mauborgne 1997; Kim and Mauborgne 2003), and the elements are so intuitive and low cost that some leaders and administrators may preemptively discount its implementation value may even argue that it is too inexpensive to be effective (Brockner 2006).

Implementation of dialogue and sharing narratives to improve the process of public research funding to accelerate research to prevent and cure global health issues like dementia diseases is arguably an ethical issue. The ethical guidelines for the American College of Epidemiology states how dialogue is an ethical requirement:

"All research findings and other information important to public health should be communicated in a timely, understandable, and responsible manner so that the widest possible community stands to benefit.... In confronting public health problems, epidemiologists sometimes act as advocates on behalf of members of affected communities." (The American College of Epidemiology 2023)

This study has limitations which should be considered when interpreting the results and impacts. We recognize that this study includes a case from a high-income European country, with recent public attention to public research communication, transparent public decision-making documentation and a high level of public research funding (Oslo Economics 2023, 10). Diligence should be taken before generalizing to other regions and low/middle-income countries.

Public research funding is organized differently around the world and medical research is becoming increasingly more international and complex (Rogers 2008; Skivington et al. 2021). We have focused on introduction of more structured dialogue between active participants in the public research funding value chain (policymakers, public decision-makers and researchers) (Figure 1). Care should be taken in interpreting the result of this study for case specific and/or nuanced stakeholder groups and scenarios.

Lastly, the study focuses on the potential theoretical effects of introducing structured dialogue in public research funding processes. It is beyond the scope of this study to explore the practical implications of implementing structured dialogue in practice as perceived from each. Future research could explore how successful implementation of structured face-to-face dialogue can be aligned with political streams of change: a defined problem, a recognized need for change and apolitical/public interest for such dialogue (Brownson et al. 2018; Kingdon and Stano 1984).

## CONCLUSIONS

Public research funding is decided by an institutional hierarchal value-chain of politicians, bureaucrats, and researchers. The funding decisions are not aligned with available knowledge or objective public needs. The persons in the funding value-chain have a professional and private roles and voices, that are not actively aligned. Dementia research is particularly vulnerable as a young science with less obvious research results in the short and medium term, despite brain health being a leading global health problem. The public research funding mechanisms are complex, non-linear and emerging. Philosophical theories suggest dialogue and exchange of personal narratives as a human and ethical approach to sharing thoughts, perceptions and objectives. Buber offers a prospective of transformative change to improve the results of publicly funded research through the implementation of systematic dialogue. Bakhtin prepares us for the interpretation of the stakeholders' multitude of roles and voices, which must be expected to continue and continue to unclarity and uncertainty in international research collaboration and public funding. The potential benefits of dialogue are in place, but this assumes an open minded and balanced dialogue, both with respect to individual and public interests (Kvale 2005). Persons engaged in dialogue may have different perspectives and objectives, but physical meetings with visual faces and body language open up for more effective dialogue with equalized humanity and vulnerability in a collaboration going forward (Levinas and Nemo 1985). Dialogue can be a timely initiative to untangle and balance the public interest of meeting public health research needs and individual interests by allocating public

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research funding in a more collaborative way and improving societal achievements and stakeholder commitment.

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