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Empowering citizens or mining resources? The contested domain of citizen engagement in professional care services



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ABSTRACT

When studying individual attempts to foster citizen engagement, scholars have pointed to the coexistence of competing rationales. Thus far, however, current literature barely elaborates on the socio-political processes through which employees of professional organizations deal with such disparate considerations. To address this gap, this article builds on an ethnographic study, conducted in the Netherlands between 2013 and 2016, of a professional care organization's attempts to engage local citizens in one of its elderly care homes. To investigate how citizen engagement is 'done' in the context of daily organizing, we followed employees as they gradually created and demarcated the scope for such engagement by approaching citizens as either strategic partners (pursuing 'democratic' rationales) or as operational volunteers (pursuing 'instrumental' rationales). In order to deal with such potentially incongruent orientations, we found that employees used discursive strategies to influence the balance that was struck between competing rationales; either through depoliticization—i.e., the downplaying of incongruities and the framing of disparate considerations as being complementary within the pursuit of a shared, overarching goal—or through politicization, i.e., the active challenging of how their colleagues prioritized one consideration over another. By showing how the successful conveyance of such (de) politicized accounts helped employees either defend or redraw the boundaries of what citizen engagement was (not) about, we contribute to extant theorization by (1) developing a processual approach to studying citizen engagement that (2) is sensitive to organizational politics.

1. Introduction

Promoted as a way to improve the responsiveness of care services that have become too bureaucratized, commercialized or professionalized (Needham, 2008; Nies, 2014), citizen engagement is currently in vogue as a guiding principle for welfare-state reform (Callaghan and Wistow, 2006; Marent et al., 2015). Policy makers have challenged professional care organizations to recalibrate their relationships with citizens, communities and community organizations, stimulating them to see these as partners in the process of designing and delivering care services (Bovaird, 2007; Pedersen and Johannsen, 2016). Nonetheless, concrete attempts at fostering such engagement rarely seem to result in the partnerships that so many policies promise and promote—even when these ambitions are supported by a broad range of actors (Marent et al., 2015; Osborne and Strokosch, 2013). Often intended to boost efficiency (Bovaird, 2007; Fotaki, 2011) or legitimize decisions that have already been made by those in power (Lee and Romano, 2013; Taylor, 2007), such participatory efforts, scholars point out, tend to be more contentious and more complex than advocates sometimes suggest.

Attempting to make sense of the intricate course of events and unexpected outcomes, several authors have drawn attention to the seemingly inherent complexities of participatory processes. First, they have pointed to the elusive meaning of catch-all terms like 'citizen engagement' and 'public participation'—both in the academic literature and in everyday use. Attempting to provide more conceptual clarity, scholars have developed typologies to categorize disparate practices of, and actors' various rationales for, citizen engagement (e.g., Arnstein, 1969; Bovaird, 2007; Marent et al., 2015). Second, scholars have drawn attention to differences between organizations. Research has demonstrated that the organizational context that embeds participatory efforts shapes the resultant position of citizens vis-à-vis decision-making processes (Croft et al., 2016). Third, scholars have shown that different actors—even within a single organizational setting or participatory process—consider different forms of engagement appropriate (Callaghan and Wistow, 2006; Cornwall, 2008; Fotaki, 2011). Although these studies help us appreciate the complexities of citizen engagement, they barely touch on the dynamics that not only surround the practical treatment of such coexisting, potentially competing orientations, but

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also, as a result, shape the manifestation of engagement efforts over time within particular organizational settings.

In order to address this very issue, this article investigates the processes through which employees of a professional care organization made sense of and dealt with competing orientations to citizen engagement. After observing employees' emphases on either 'democratic' or 'instrumental' rationales for such engagement, we have analyzed how actors intermittently depoliticized or politicized the working balance between such disparate orientations in their attempts to shape the character of participatory efforts and, in the process, challenge or reaffirm established management practices within their organization. By building on our ethnographic study, we contribute to extant literature in two ways. First, while earlier studies tend to provide static accounts of participatory processes, we demonstrate the merits of a processual approach to theorizing the social dynamics surrounding competing orientations to citizen engagement. Second, we show that both internal management practices and organizational politics are more than just the 'organizational context' that shapes citizen-engagement efforts (Croft et al., 2016). Instead, organizational politics lie at the very core of participatory processes as they unfold over time. Before turning to our case study of a professional care provider's attempts to engage local citizens, we first ground our power-sensitive processual approach in the extant literature on citizen engagement in planning and delivering care services.

2. Grasping the nature of citizen engagement

While building on different concepts and themes—such as co-production (Ewert and Evers, 2014; Needham, 2008), participatory governance (Durose, 2011) and public participation (Marent et al., 2015; Martin, 2008)—various strands of literature from the fields of health-care policy, public administration and organization studies share an interest in the changing role of citizens in organizing healthcare and other (semi-)public services. In practice, the boundaries between such different conceptual approaches are ambiguous. Participation, for example, is argued to be an 'infinitely malleable concept [that] can easily be reframed to meet almost any demand made of it' (Cornwall, 2008, p. 269). Similarly, the concept of co-production is said to have 'excessive elasticity' (Needham, 2008, p. 224), lacking a 'dominant, coherent narrative' (Ewert and Evers, 2014, p. 427) as it is applied to a wide range of practices and seen from a variety of perspectives. As such, pinpointing and understanding what exactly is changing in the role of citizens has become a widely stated challenge for scholars, policy makers and practitioners alike.

Attempting to create more conceptual clarity, various scholars distinguish the different rationales behind governments' and provider-organizations' pursuit of citizen engagement (Bovaird, 2007; Martin, 2008; Osborne and Stokosch, 2013). Across the aforementioned literature, a common distinction is made between, on the one hand, 'democratic' rationales for engaging citizens and, on the other hand, 'instrumental' motivations (Bovaird, 2007; Martin, 2008; Osborne and Stokosch, 2013). The former refer to attempts to strengthen citizens' voice, emphasizing their roles in 'democratizing' the process of service planning, design and management, while the latter signify a more instrumental interest in citizen contributions, leading employees to solicit citizens to complement or replace professional services in the areas in which delivery falls short (Bovaird, 2007). Such different rationales suggest different citizen positionings in relation to professional service organizations.

Reflecting on the disparate reasons for pursuing engagement, some scholars critically demonstrate that professional or governmental initiatives are often presented as being 'a contribution to more democracy by empowering citizens [and] emphasizing dialogue' (Marent et al., 2015, p. 831) while eventually serving as a much narrower 'means to an end, to increase the acceptance, quality, and effectiveness of particular programs and services' (Marent et al., 2015) or to support cost-

containment measures (Fotaki, 2011). In their study of organizations' use of public deliberation, Lee and Romano emphasize that the literature 'typically assumes that its emergence and growth is functional—that it is a useful way of actually facilitating less hierarchical, more responsive and flexible decision-making [...] [but] when scrutinized in more depth, deliberation processes are loosely coupled with decision-making, or even irrelevant to it altogether' (Lee and Romano, 2013, p. 735). In a similar vein, Croft et al. (2016) demonstrate that managers tend to co-opt citizens into managerially framed roles—particularly in organizations with a rational-hierarchical style of management. Instead of assuming the desirability of participatory practices, these accounts demonstrate that we should first empirically assess both how disparate rationales for engaging citizens play out in practice and how they affect citizens' positioning in the organization of care services (Contandriopoulos, 2004; Pedersen and Johannsen, 2016). Consequently, the question of how to understand the everyday work practices in which such different rationales materialize is key and, thus far, under-researched.

3. Coexisting rationales for citizen engagement

In capturing its complexities and often unforeseen or undesired outcomes, several scholars have pointed out that different views on the 'appropriate' domain for citizen engagement—and, accordingly, 'appropriate' participatory practices—tend to coexist (Fotaki, 2011). 'In practice, all of the forms and meanings of participation [...] may be found in a single project or process' (Cornwall, 2008, pp. 273–274). Indeed, when citizen engagement means something different to those involved in the same participatory process, this constitutes 'a source of ambiguity, at locality level, about the status of those involved' (Callaghan and Wistow, 2006, p. 2292): with what exactly should citizens (not) be engaged?

To better understand such ambiguity, we must acknowledge that participatory practices are embedded in heterogeneous organizational environments in which people face competing norms, rules, ideals and objectives (Callaghan and Wistow, 2006; Fotaki, 2011). Likewise, citizen engagement is shaped by, and can be at odds with, established organizing principles in public service management. For example, participatory practices are contingent upon and restricted by the particular (e.g., more or less hierarchical) management practices prevailing within an organization (Croft et al., 2016; Pedersen and Johannsen, 2016) while care professionals might also delimit the spaces that are open for 'legitimate' participation (El Enany et al., 2013). Moreover, when trying to engage citizens within a market-based care system, 'making money by capturing customers easily overrules the building of trust-based relationships' (Fotaki, 2011, p. 946). Accounting for these competing principles and orientations draws our attention to the almost inherently contentious nature of any particular approach to citizen engagement (Contandriopoulos, 2004).

As a result, investigating how those involved deal with the contentious nature of citizen engagement and, subsequently, how their responses affect the direction in which participatory processes develop becomes crucial. Generally lacking firm empirical grounding in the day-to-day practices in which citizen engagement gradually unfolds, current literature provides us with a theoretical framework that is limited in its extent to capture such dynamics. Most scholars seem to account for disparate orientations towards engagement by analyzing structural organizational aspects—i.e., by focusing on actors' particular positions within the organizational chart (Durose, 2011; Pedersen and Johannsen, 2016) or by looking at how organizational processes are structured (Callaghan and Wistow, 2006; Croft et al., 2016). El Enany et al. (2013) do provide a temporal perspective on the emergence of different participatory roles, but they only indirectly touch on the competing rationales for engagement that may coexist within a single organization. In short, by providing temporal snapshots that neglect the 'turbulent, dynamic context' (Croft et al., 2016, p. 31) in which

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