

THE PRACTICES OF MODERN PUBLIC ENCOUNTERS

AN ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK FOR STUDYING INTERACTIONS BETWEEN PUBLIC PROFESSIONALS AND CITIZENS IN COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

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Abstract

Public encounters (interactions between public professionals and citizens) are a central topic in the study of public administration. While public encounters have traditionally been studied in the context of service delivery, the current focus on community participation raises new issues for the traditional theme of power inequality in decision making. From the perspective of deliberative democracy it is argued that community participation can enhance equal exercise of power through face-to-face interaction, which raises questions about professional expertise and impartiality from the perspective of bureaucracy. How this theoretical tension works out in practice needs to be studied through inductive, open-ended evaluation of the practices of community participation. This paper presents an analytical framework to examine how public professionals and citizens understand and act upon community participation. By maintaining a close connection between theory and practice, it is possible to arrive at more fundamental theoretical and practical insights about modern public encounters.

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INTRODUCTION

What happens when public professionals and citizens meet? The nature of public encounters, i.e. the interactions between public professionals and citizens, is a central topic in the study of public administration (Goodsell, 1981; King & Stivers, 1998). The traditional focus on service delivery (Katz, Gutek, Kahn, & Barton, 1975; Lipsky, 1980) has produced evaluations of how public encounters affect equal treatment of citizens and the implementation of resource allocation in the domain of welfare policy. However, the current popularity of community participation as an administrative innovation raises important new theoretical and methodological issues for studying public encounters. Community participation entails that local public professionals need to engage in more long term and intensive face-to-face interaction with citizens than before. Public encounters are thus likely to occur in new and unexpected situations in which public professionals and citizens need to give substance to their roles, relationships, and mutual goals. This paper intends to develop an analytical approach to study the practical and theoretical dilemmas that arise in community participation.

At the heart of modern public encounters is the tension between Max Weber's (1922/1978) ideal type of bureaucracy and theories of deliberative democracy (e.g. Habermas, 1996; Forester, 1999; Fung, 2004). Both perspectives hold contrasting positions towards the expertise and power inequality between public professionals and citizens. Weber constructed the ideal type of bureaucracy to signal the increasing need for bureaucratic experts in our (increasingly) complex modern society (Weber, 1922/1978, p. 975). From the deliberative perspective, it is argued that the unequal power that follows from this trend should be counterbalanced by empowerment of citizens (e.g. Wagenaar, 2007; Kelly, 2004). For many reasons, it is believed that citizens and public professionals have to collaborate on an equal power basis in public decision making. From the bureaucratic perspective, it can be rebutted that any trend away from the bureaucratic norm of impartiality is to the detriment of social equality, individual freedom, and public decision making.

The community participation literature has insufficiently explored the importance and saliency of modern public encounters for community participation (see also Bartels, 2009). While from the deliberative perspective it is argued that community participation constitutes a venue where face-to-face interaction leads to more equal and high quality decisions, from the bureaucratic perspective it can be argued that face-to-face interactions make it exceedingly difficult for public professionals to be impartial (Lipsky, 1980), i.e. "eliminating

from official business love, hatred, and all purely personal, irrational, and emotional elements which escape calculation” (Weber, 1922/1978, p. 975). How this theoretical tension plays out in practice is highly indistinct, because the dynamics and outcomes of community participation projects depend on the ways in which public professionals and citizens deal with the great amount of discretion during implementation. Empirical research has identified a wide variety of factors to influence the exercise of discretion in these public encounters, yet has failed to reach more than partial or mixed conclusions.

To solve this problem, this paper presents an analytical framework to identify the underlying mechanisms that generate different outcomes in community participation projects. The main claim of this analytical framework is that public encounters need to be understood as *practices*: the ways in which practitioners understand their daily work situation at hand and act upon this understanding (Wagenaar & Cook, 2003). Practitioners develop practices in order to cope with the complex, ambiguous, and changing nature of administrative practice. Practices serve to organize experiences and direct attention towards certain lines of action. It is through their explication that we can comprehend how public professionals and citizens understand the developments of a community participation project and their respective roles in it, and why their actions lead projects towards certain outcomes. Practices are reflected in the narratives (i.e. practical stories) practitioners tell, and can be explicated through inductive, open-ended, interpretative research. Grounded theory analysis (cf. Charmaz, 2006) offers systematic and rigorous methods and techniques to carefully generate a theoretical understanding of practical situations.

The main argument of this paper is that the practices approach is the most appropriate way to arrive at new insights about the nature and dynamics of public encounters in community participation. These insights will not only add to the community participation literature, but also to the practice of community participation. The final section explains how a focus on practical dilemmas is beneficial to practical learning and improvement in the practice of community participation.

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

Community participation embodies a broad variety of administrative innovations, which renders an exhaustive definition difficult. In abstract terms, community participation refers to all the institutional arrangements and practices through which residents and local public and private stakeholders are somehow involved in local governance processes. In practical terms,

community participation can take many forms, such as neighborhood councils, citizen juries, forums, panels, public hearings, service networks, task forces, collaborative planning, ICT modules, etc. (Arnstein, 1969; Innes & Booher, 2004; Roberts, 2004). It can be used as an instrument within contexts such as Local Agenda 21, infrastructural planning, economic regeneration, public health, social capital, and public safety, and can take place at a city-wide, neighborhood, or street level. Since it is impossible to develop a comprehensive understanding of such a multifaceted phenomenon, the analytical framework focuses on urban regeneration, because this entails the most comprehensive form of community participation. The discussion of community participation in this section serves to explicate the practical, theoretical, and analytical issues that arise within this context.

Community participation has become popular in many European countries (OECD, 2001), especially in relation to urban regeneration. Despite great inter- and intra-national differences, modern urban policies demonstrate a clear tendency to promote initiatives that link partnerships and citizen engagement at the neighborhood level to achieve goals of economic competitiveness, social cohesion, environmental sustainability, and democratic governance (e.g. Imrie & Raco, 2003; Buck, Gordon, Harding, & Turok, 2005; Denters & Rose, 2005). The widespread presence of the ambition to engage in community participation projects creates an atmosphere in which public encounters are (perceived as) an important element of urban regeneration. That is, in modern urban policies “citizens are seen as an *integral part* of the governance process and their active involvement is considered essential in the substantive decisions facing a community” (Roberts, 2004, p. 320; emphasis added).

Thus, community participation in urban regeneration is explicitly based on the ambition to create inclusive and innovative decision making processes. It is important to note that community participation can involve stakeholder participation, citizen participation, or a combination of both. Stakeholder participation refers to all the institutions and actions that take place between all public and private actors imbued with some kind of public authority, while citizen participation denotes all the institutions and actions “by which members of a society (those not holding office or administrative positions in government) share power with public officials in making substantive decisions and in taking action related to the community” (Roberts, 2004, p. 320). In general, then, community participation involves projects in which public professionals with pay and formal decision making authority¹ engage

¹ The term ‘public professionals’ refers to administrative officials of local government and professionals of local quangos that are involved in urban governance and have specific formal public authorities. Local politicians also participate in these processes but from a clear distance. Community participation projects are primarily

in some form of deliberation and collaboration with citizens who do not have governmental pay or power. This ambition implies that inclusive and innovative values and practices are emphasized on a larger scale and level of comprehensiveness than was the case with preceding forms of community participation (Pierre & Peters, 2000).

To be sure, community participation originates from Ancient Greece and has manifested itself throughout political history in general (Held, 1996) and since WW II in urban governance in specific (e.g. Hoorn, 1975; Dente & Regonini, 1980; Hain, 1980; Susskind & Elliot, 1983). Community participation has been used to enhance local collective problem solving capacity, consumer satisfaction, and democratic renewal. However, modern community participation differs from prior initiatives because of the emphasis on the capacity to create more engaged, communal, and democratic local citizen and stakeholder communities. Modern participation not only requires deliberative *coordination* but more fundamentally *integration* of individual goals, interests, structures, and practices into one collective whole (Perri 6, 2005).

This communitarian emphasis manifests itself through practical experiments with and scientific evaluations of collaborative initiatives that resolve around the ‘transformative power of dialogue’ in modulating individual interests into collective goals and actions (Healey, 2003; Innes, 2004; Innes & Booher, 2004). Both urban policies and normative theories support this trend. Urban policies focus in particular on the regeneration of neighborhoods, based on the assumption that problems are local and exceptional, and that temporary targeted policies can create non-problematic areas that are well-embedded in mainstream society and economy. Neighborhoods are envisaged as spatially bordered social communities where problems with social cohesion, economic deprivation, and physical decay can be solved (Blokland, 2003; Uitermark, 2003; Whitehead, 2004; Amin, 2005). The equation of ‘neighborhoods’ with ‘community’ is supported by normative theories that advocate the importance of public values, civic engagement, networked governance, and collaborative public management (Moore, 1995; Stoker, 2002; Agranoff & McGuire, 2003; Denhardt & Denhardt, 2003; Torfing, 2005).

Despite the great ambitions of this novel approach to community participation, usually “it is a story of struggles with mixed results” (Spiegel & Perlman, 1983, p. 125). Projects often do not live up to the ambitions and goals set. The reasons for the emergence of unanticipated or even undesired consequences are multitude and highly complex. Scientific

organized and managed by practitioners and their outcomes depend primarily on the interactions between public professionals and citizens.

evaluation of projects is highly complicated, so that it is extremely difficult to reach more than “partial and mixed answers” (Burton et al., 2004, p. 43). Empirical research on community participation has emphasized the importance of a great number of factors for the dynamics and outcomes of projects (see table 1). Research on modern community participation is thus more likely to become a ‘ticking the box exercise’ rather than a valuable addition to our understanding of this phenomenon, if the research is carried out as deductive hypothesis testing or as inductive unguided ethnography. Therefore, a systematic in-depth inductive approach is needed that intends to explicate the causal mechanisms that underlie community participation projects.

Constitutional/legal rights and responsibilities	Physical setting	Embedded routines & expectations
Distribution of financial resources	Available time	Representativeness of citizens
Institutional design of project	Degree of operational discretion	Nature & intricacy of problems
Urban policy context	Attitudes to government	‘On the spot’ improvised solutions
Administrative traditions	Willingness to participate	Sudden events
Number & nature of local quangos	Social, economic & cultural composition of community	(Perceived) degree of problem solving
Central government control mechanisms	Identities, perceptions, and needs	Supervision and control
General policy criteria	Existing or newly created conflicts	Organizational culture
Funding process and power	Administrative construction of groups	Individual values and preferences
Professional expertise	Social exclusion	Interpersonal interactions
Professional networks	Local elites	Communicative skills
Formal rules, structures & SOPs of local authority	Socio-economic barriers to participation	Pre-existing agendas

Table 1. Some factors to take into account... (my overview – KB)

Such research needs to focus on the public encounters that take place within community participation projects. Modern community participation fosters interaction between public professionals and citizens on a longer term and with greater intensity than before. The focus on mutual collaboration, understanding, and trust (Innes & Booher, 2004) implies that long term relationships have to be developed rather than single shot encounters. This type of public encounters will take shape within the complex context of urban regeneration in which political, legal, administrative, economic, and societal factors (see table 1) mediate the degree to which the goals of community participation will be attained. Public professionals and citizens are likely to encounter each other in new, unexpected, and ambiguous situations. Thus, the outcomes of community participation projects depend greatly on the ways in which public professionals and citizens deal with the situations in which their public encounters take place.

To conclude, the discussion of the nature of modern community participation in this section has demonstrated the need for inductive empirical research on the types of public

encounters that emerge in community participation projects. Community participation projects intend to develop innovative and inclusive initiatives, while taking place within a complex environment filled with complicating factors. The next section will further delve into the fundamental dilemma that emerges for public encounters within community participation. The subsequent sections will develop an analytical framework to study public encounters in community participation with a systematic in-depth inductive approach.

PUBLIC ENCOUNTERS

Public encounters, interactions between public professionals and citizens (cf. Goodsell, 1981), are a traditional topic of attention for the analysis of state-society relations in the study of public administration. One of the first explicit recognitions of its importance comes from Finer (1931), who stated: “this is the problem of the twentieth century: the relationship of officials and the public” (p. 23). This statement receives renewed impetus within the setting of community participation, because “it most often rests on the shoulders of public administrators for successful execution” (Roberts, 2004, p. 317). That is, public professionals possess a great amount of *discretion* in the implementation of participatory processes, which they share with citizens. During implementation it is likely that goals and criteria are vague or ambiguous, resources scarce, and the process packed with intricacies (cf. Lipsky, 1980; Irvin & Stansbury, 2004; Ray, Hudson, Campbell-Barr, & Shutes, 2008). In other words, discretion makes the nature and outcomes of public encounters by definition indistinct, and it is the goal of the public encounters literature to uncover the mechanisms that govern them.

The public encounters literature –which is not an organized discipline but rather consists of insights from a variety of independent studies with few efforts at cross-fertilization (Goodsell, 1981)– received great impetus from the publication of Lipsky’s (1980) seminal study on street level bureaucracy. Although public encounters were traditionally described in terms of formal responsibilities and moral obligations (cf. Weber, 1922/1978; Finer, 1931), the literature has primarily developed through analyses of welfare services, professionals’ effectiveness, and socio-economic inequality (e.g. Kahn, Katz, & Gutek, 1976; Nelson, 1980; Sandfort, 2000). However, the current conceptual focus on ‘governance’ implies that public encounters are analyzed in terms of responsiveness, accountability (i.e. external accountability towards citizens and other agencies rather than internal accountability towards political superiors), collaboration, and democratic

participation (Peters & Pierre, 2000; Hill & Hupe, 2007; Kelly, 2004)². The differences between these analytical foci significantly affect the way in which the exercise of discretion by public professionals is studied and judged.

Basically, the debate consists of variations on the positions of Finer (1941), who insisted on top-down control and strict regulation of professionals' behavior, and Friedrich (1940), who placed trust in the creative exercise of discretion to solve complex problems. In the study of public administration³, the debate develops between, what can be called the *bureaucratic perspective*, administrative theories that focus on democratic control structures to limit administrative discretion and unequal treatment of citizens, and, on the other hand what can be called the *deliberative perspective*, public policy approaches that focus on the practical skills needed to solve policy problems (see Lynn, 1996).

The bureaucratic perspective traditionally aims to develop scientifically grounded competent administration and democratically controlled organizations. Analyses emphasize executive responsibility in the sense of administrative discretion separated from politics. The focus is on "the managerial tools, techniques, knowledge, and skills that can be used to turn ideas and policy into programs of action" (Lynn, 1996, p. 39). The traditional concern of the bureaucratic perspective is how to limit or control discretion in order to prevent unequal treatment and demise of individual freedom of citizens by bureaucrats. The goal is not to eliminate discretion, but rather to ensure that bureaucrats' behavior is directed at the public interest instead of private gain and power accumulation. The ideal type of bureaucracy embodies the traditional framework for this goal by placing the administration under a system of political control, formal rules of decision making, and a substantive bureaucratic ethos (Weber, 1922/1978; Simon, 1945/1997; Albrow, 1980; Du Gay, 2000).

The deliberative perspective is related to the public policy literature on policy formulation through multi-actor collaboration and implementation that yields desirable social outcomes. Policy analyses do not talk in terms of technical-rational administration, but rather about political and strategic action. Social interaction, improvisation, and the concrete decision making situation are seen as more fundamental factors for decision making than

² Somewhat of an exception to this trend is found in Miller, Grødeland & Koshechkina (2001) and Miller (2006), where public encounters are studied not so much under the umbrella of deliberative governance, but rather in terms of bureaucratic responsiveness and clientalism.

³ In political science, the debate is dominated by the public choice principal agent theory that focuses on political control, bureaucratic shirking, and discretion limiting incentives (Niskanen, 1971; G. J. Miller & Moe, 1983; Brehm & Gates, 1993). Recently, under the auspices of delegation theory, discretion is less depicted as a problem and more as an inevitable phenomenon and political strategy (G. J. Miller, 2005; Pollack, 2005).

rules, structures, and routines. The traditional concern of the deliberative perspective is what practical skills are used and needed to harness concrete policy problems, enhance civic trust, and manage political intricacies. A bottom-up approach is generally favored, because those with high proximity to a problem are argued to possess the most adequate knowledge and skills to solve it (Elmore, 1979; Harmon, 1995; Moore, 1995; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000; Wagenaar, 2004).

An important tension for community participation follows from these opposing perspectives. Community participation entails that public professionals and citizens engage in face-to-face contact to develop mutual trust and understanding and enhance their common problem solving capacity (Innes, 2004). Mutual trust refers to citizens trusting public professionals to be professional experts for policy implementation as well as to public professionals trusting citizens to be knowledgeable partners for collaboration (Hill & Hupe, 2007, p. 282; Wagenaar, 2007, p. 26-27). This goal further stimulates what Lipsky (1980) already thought to be almost impossible: “the reality of the work of street level bureaucrats could hardly be farther from the bureaucratic ideal of impersonal detachment in decision making” (p. 9).

Bureaucracy offers a formal structural to withdraw from social relationships and concomitant feelings of reciprocity and social duty. Community participation increases the chance on the emergence of the personal and obliging relationships that go against the bureaucratic ideal of striving for action ‘without regard for the person’. That is, the ideal type of bureaucracy (Weber, 1922/1978) “segregates official activity from the sphere of private life” (p. 957), “does not establish a relationship to a person” (p. 959), and “would not constitute a realm of *free*, arbitrary action and discretion, of *personally* motivated favor and valuation” (p. 979) [italics in original]. The bureaucratic system promotes this norm by creating structural power inequality between the bureaucratic expert and the civic ‘dilettante’. In contrast, community participation thrives on the idea that citizens need to “share power with public officials in making substantive decisions and in taking action related to the community” (Roberts, 2004, p. 320). Thus, the bureaucratic perspective upholds impartiality and power inequality, in contrast to the face-to-face negotiation and equal power of the deliberative perspective (Kweit & Kweit, 1981; King, Feltey, & Susel, 1998; Bartels, 2009).

In sum, the concept of public encounters has a renewed value in the context of the current emergence of community participation. Public encounters in community participation need to be understood in relation to the opposing views of the bureaucratic perspective and the deliberative perspective on the issues of discretion, impartiality, and power inequality.

Empirical research needs to study what forms public encounters take in the actual practice of community participation. The next sections present the analytical framework along which this research needs to be conducted.

PRACTICES

The previous section has demonstrated that discretion and the ways in which it is exercised are central to public encounters in community participation. The exercise of discretion –the liberty or power of deciding, or acting according to one’s own judgment– is dependent on the *situation* in which practitioners work (Forsyth, 1999). Practitioners can deal with stable and unambiguous work situations through formal rules and informal routines, but cannot depend on these standardized responses in uncertain and ambiguous situations. Rather, practitioners have to improvise and develop an understanding of the most appropriate action (Wagenaar, 2004). Since community participation is likely to produce new and unexpected situations, it is important to understand its *practices: the ways in which practitioners understand their daily work situation at hand and act upon this understanding* (Wagenaar & Cook, 2003)⁴. The current section will explain why the concept of practices is essential to understand the administrative practice of community participation and how the concept of practices is instrumental as a first step to operationalize the concept of public encounters.

The basic assumption on which the concept of practices is based is that the nature of administrative practice is organized chaos (cf. Cohen, March, & Olsen, 1979). Although there is a great amount of rules, structures, and routines to provide stability and guidance, every situation faces individuals with the question ‘what is going on here?’. It is necessary to study the responses of practitioners to this question in order to understand what actually happens in administrative practice. “Whether asked explicitly (...) or tacitly (...) the question is put and the answer to it is presumed by the way the individuals then proceed to get on with the affairs at hand” (Goffman, 1986, p. 8). Practitioners strive for control over their daily activities, but are constantly faced with many uncertainties, wicked problems, and complicated solutions (Rittel & Webber, 1973). To deal with their constant ‘practice worries’ (Rein, 1983), practitioners formulate mental constructions of the nature of problems and required solutions. These mental constructions (or frames) guide actions, i.e. practitioners hold the belief that

⁴ It has to be noted that the sequence of actions following understandings is an analytical one. In practice, understandings can follow from action (learning-by-doing) or action can take place without being based on an explicit understanding.

their actions are justified based on these understandings. As such, practitioners encounter a mixture of faith and doubt in their daily work: complex situations force them constantly to switch between certainty (frame) and uncertainty (worry), between resolute and unplanned behavior.

Practices, then, signify the practical understandings and actions of practitioners. Wagenaar (2004) defines practices as:

“the hundreds of practical judgments, the everyday taken-for-granted routines and practices, the explicit and tacit knowledge that is brought to bear on concrete situations, the moving about in the legal-moral environment of large administrative bureaucracies, the mastering of difficult human-emotional situations, the negotiating of discretionary space, and the interactive give and take with colleagues” (p. 644).

Wenger (1998) similarly demarcates the focus of theories of practices to the “everyday activity and real-life settings, but with an emphasis on the social systems of shared resources by which groups organize and coordinate their activities, mutual relationships, and interpretations of the world.” (p. 13).

The focus on the practical activities of practitioners is in accordance with the ‘Organizational Process Model’ Allison (1969) uses to explain policy processes, yet places less emphasis on standard operating procedures, routines, and formal rules and structures. Although these types of institutions (March & Olsen, 1984, 1989) are taken into account, the practices approach puts more emphasis on perceptions, framing of attention, and practical judgments:

“The genesis of any practice is littered with countless choices of which elements in the original problem situation to emphasize and which to neglect, which elements from earlier practices to incorporate and which to discard (...), from which related practices to borrow in the solution of a problem, which consequences to take seriously and which to take for granted, and how in general to define what is relevant” (Wagenaar & Cook, 2003, p. 165).

Thus, the practices approach explains policy controversies not in terms of rational decision making by a unitary actor, or power play between political actors, but by focusing on “the moral-political interactions of ordinary people struggling with the concrete, practical face of social and technical issues” (Wagenaar & Cook, 2003, p. 167). Policy processes are understood through analysis of the ways in which a multitude of actors on the street level utilize their discretion.

The two central concepts in the definition of practices that are key to understand its focus are ‘action’ and ‘situations’. ‘Action’ entails a focus on the ways in which practitioners develop an understanding of practical situations, set goals, engage in particular actions

accordingly, and adjust their understandings, goals, and lines of action along the way. The practices approach opposes the unrealistic levels of intentionality, comprehension, and predictability inherent to the assumptions of rational models of decision making (Howlett & Ramesh, 2003, p. 175-177). The rational decision making model of (the evaluation of the consistency between) goal-oriented rationality and utility maximizing behavior is contrasted with emphasis on ‘learning by doing’ (Schön, 1983), improvisation (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000), unarticulated assumptions (Wagenaar, 2004), and social interaction (Wenger, 1998). Practitioners can act rationally to attain certain goals, while at the same time they often have no clear goals in mind, or adjust their goals somewhere along the way. As such, the actions of practitioners are seen as both purposeful and spontaneous (Bourdieu, 1972, p. 72; Wagenaar & Cook, 2003, p. 150).

‘Situations’ refer to the idea that individual understandings of the most appropriate action are not triggered by institutions, but rather derive from the ways in which the situation “signals to the actor that certain actions are called for, but also that certain conventions, commitments, physical obstacles, normative beliefs, procedures or rules have to be taken into account” (Wagenaar & Cook, 2003, p. 150). The practices approach does not explain the preferences and behavior of practitioners solely by reference to the institutions surrounding them. Rather, the focus is on how practical situations force practitioners to make sense of the situation in relation to other actors, the structural constraints of their organization, and the broader cultural values of their environment. It is important to note that the practices approach explicitly refers to institutions and the macro-context. The point is that processes of public policy and administrative reform are shaped by the understandings and actions of practitioners that on the one hand are situated in a macro level context, while on the other hand develop in unintentional and accidental ways due to the influence of practical situations (Bourdieu, 1972; Wagenaar & Cook, 2003).

Practices should also be understood in reference to three more well-known and analytically related concepts: bounded rationality, coping mechanisms, and policy frames. Bounded rationality helps to understand the relation between the individual, the organization, and the environment in terms of cognitive and practical limitations. Practitioners possess limited mental and practical capacities to deal with their complex tasks and environment and are influenced by the rules and structures of their organization (Simon, 1997). Coping mechanisms help to underline the necessity and inevitability for practitioners to search for practical and mental shortcuts to deal with concrete, demanding situations. Stereotypes, catchwords, and principled beliefs facilitate action by reducing the complexity and

uncertainty of decision making settings that consist of conflicting demands, and scarce time, energy, resources, and information (Lipsky, 1980). Policy frames help to specify how practitioners conceptualize situations and act accordingly. A frame is a way for “selecting, organizing, interpreting, and making sense of” *events, values, and causal beliefs* (Rein & Schön, 1993, p. 146).

The concept of frames, i.e. how practitioners form a resolution to their problematic situations, is in particular useful to further operationalize the concept of practices. The concept of practices refers to the organized chaos of administrative practice and the discretion practitioners possess to make sense of the practical situations they encounter in their work. Practices seem particularly useful for understanding public encounters, because of the debatable purposes, moral uncertainties, and tentative techniques inherent to social work (Lipsky, 1980; Rein, 1983). The inevitable professional anxiety of dealing with citizens and social problems implies that practitioners experience a lot of ill-defined emotions, which they have to signal and interpret, and formulate an understanding of. In a word, practitioners have to make a lot of decisions about how to act. The empirical question is what is included in the cognitive construction of problems and solutions (and what is not). Frames are exactly that, definitions of situations and experiences that link events, causal beliefs, and values in order to organize attention and facilitate, or legitimate, action (cf. Rein & Schön, 1993). The negotiation of these frames and the acting upon them leads to concrete, shared practices.

As such, frames are connected to actions. Dealing with practice worries is not simply a passive mental process, but rather an active process of ‘learning-by-doing’ (Schön, 1983). The practices approach is thus not confined to cognitive structures, but also serves to discover concrete changes in behavior. The question for community participation is how public professionals and citizens act on their respective *roles* (see p. 3-4). A role refers to “the behavior of status occupants that is oriented towards the patterned expectations of others” (Merton, 1968, p. 41). Given the presence of ‘role-sets’, *different roles a single individual is committed to*, the challenge for individuals is to find ways to go about in their daily activities without constant role conflicts. The previous section served to explain why the tension between professional and personal roles is central to administrative practice in general and public encounters in particular (Weber, 1922/1978; Lipsky, 1980; Du Gay, 2000; W. L. Miller, 2006; Wagenaar, 2007). Faced with new, unexpected, and complex situations, practitioners can act by sticking to old role patterns or by developing new roles, depending on the understanding they develop of the situation at hand.

To sum up, this section has followed up on the main observation of previous section – that outcomes of community participation are indistinct because discretion is central to public encounters– by developing an analytical operationalization of discretion. It has been argued that the concept of practices is extremely useful to understand how practitioners deal with the organized chaos of administrative practice. Practices embody the mental frames that practitioners develop to understand a practical work situation, and the actions that follow from these frames. The subsequent section will provide the operational methods and techniques to inductively detect, explicate, and understand these practices.

GROUNDED THEORY ANALYSIS

The methodological operationalization of the practices approach is extremely important for arriving at a deeper understanding of the underlying mechanisms of community participation. Analysis of practices is necessarily an inductive and interpretative process, which has the odds against it when it comes to scientific ideals as objectivity, clarity, and replicability. Although such objections are based on a dogmatic stance against interpretative research, it is nevertheless necessary to explicate how data can be collected inductively in a systematic and rigorous way. Therefore, this section will explicate the kind of data that is sought for, the methods and techniques through which data is collected and analyzed. It is argued that practices can only be understood from high quality data that is obtained through open-ended and inductive interviewing and analyzed through grounded theory analysis. This approach serves to uncover the practices behind the narratives practitioners tell, and as such to arrive at a theoretical understanding of what is going on in the data.

Practices (frames and actions) are reflected in the *narratives* practitioners tell. “Policy narratives are stories that relate “a succession of events, real or hypothetical, (...) typically have beginnings, middles, and ends, and include plots, characters, and frequently recognizable styles of storytelling” (Roe, 1994, p. 53). Narratives can be structured according to a great variety of types of stories (e.g. of decline or control, about institutions, people, or professional practice), metaphors (e.g. natural laws, machines, tools, war), empty signifiers (evocative yet hollow terms), and stereotypes (Lipsky, 1980; Rein, 1983; Stone, 1989; Kaplan, 1993; Wagenaar, 1997; Kohler Riessman, 2002; Stone, 2002). The goal of frame and narrative analysis is to uncover how these narrative elements organize the experience of practitioners (Goffman, 1986; Stone, 2002). That is, what is the story that is told, what are the underlying goals and assumptions, does it make sense in relation to the empirical situation

and the frames of others, and how does it fit into the broader narrative? Comparison of different narratives leads to a story of its own about the similarities, differences, ambiguities, and tensions inherent to a particular case.

The collection and analysis of narratives is a highly sensitive and intricate process. Grounded theory analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 1990, 2002, 2006) is an inductive and open-ended approach of data gathering and analysis that is extremely useful for this purpose. The main goal of GTA is to make (analytical) sense of the statements and actions of the individuals studied. *What are their views and experiences an instance of?* This question guides the process of generating conceptual categories from empirical data by gradually abstracting them into theoretical explanations. In that way, the researcher can raise analytical issues out of conflicting frames and as such ‘ground’ a theory in the empirical data. The procedures of grounded theory analysis enhance the collection of high quality data and rigorous, systematic, and saturated analysis of the studied situation. In the end, grounded theory analysis can reveal “constructions or competing definitions of the situation as given in action, not merely stated in reconstructed accounts” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 180).

Following that rationale, quality is seen as detailed descriptions of respondents’ views, experiences and actions. The goal is to gather data that go beyond superficial descriptions of events or justifications of actions and, instead, get a view on *the concrete experiences, events, and actions on which respondents build their frame*. High quality data will translate into high quality theories. To be sure, there are more internal criteria and checks to ensure ‘good’ grounded theories (see Charmaz, 2006, p. 182-183 for a list of criteria). In general, grounded theories can be judged on the level of abstraction from the data, their link to, and illustration by, the data, and their link to the broader context (Charmaz, 2002). These quality criteria are pursued in each of the four stages of grounded theory analysis.

The first stage is the collection of rich data, primarily through in-depth, or intensive, interviewing⁵. Interviews can be characterized as directed conversations (from the perspective of the interviewer) or unfolding stories (from the perspective of the interviewee). Both terms refer to the combination of flexibility and control: on the one hand, interviews are conversational, open-ended, and guided by the respondent’s narrative that emerges, while on the other hand, the researcher has to focus the interview to ensure that useful data is collected (Charmaz, 2002). Grounded theory analysis provides several heuristics to maintain this

⁵ Next to in-depth interviewing, textual analysis of relevant policy documents can be used in addition to gain insight in the broader context of cases. In analyzing policy documents, the main strategy will be to strike a balance between subtracting information and scrutinizing their underlying views, assumptions, and goals.

balance. To start with, interviews need to have beginnings (opening questions) and ends (closure questions). In between, questions vary according to what the respondent tells, while the researcher monitors the quality of the information provided. There are several sophisticated interviewing techniques that serve to direct the respondent to providing as much useful detailed answers in a comfortable way⁶. As such, the respondent is guided away from giving generalized answers or justifications that summarize rather than describe experiences.

The second stage is coding of the transcribed interviews. Coding is “the process of defining what the data are about” by “naming segments of data with a label that simultaneously categorizes, summarizes, and accounts for each piece of data” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 43). It is the first step in going from description to conceptualization: what is actually going on in the data? Codes have to be active and evocative words that are narrow enough to describe detailed parts of data and broad enough to represent underlying assumptions, views, or tensions. In other words, codes are ‘sensitizing concepts’ that stick to the data as well as lead to theoretical categories. This stage first involves initial coding, naming each segment of data, and, secondly, focused coding, using the most significant and frequent codes. It is important in this stage to stick close to the data by describing it on its own terms, rather than immediately applying already existing theories. In that way, (detailed) coding helps the researcher to see things that would otherwise be overlooked.

The third stage, memo-writing, is a pivotal intermediate step between data collection and the writing of paper drafts. Research memos serve to evaluate the data, i.e. to explain codes, link them to each other, develop ideas, and fine-tune subsequent data search (Charmaz, 2006). Several techniques that help to focus memos are to give them a title, define categories, and discuss where the categories and data are leading the research. Furthermore, numerical and graphical representations of codes, actors, and mutual connections aid insight into the relationships between codes and categories (Roe, 1994, p. 155-162). More advanced memos serve to define categories, identify gaps, and look for patterns. Gradually, the focus in changed from data towards creating dialogue between the theory and the data. As such, memo-writing helps to get from analytical categories as descriptive and synthesizing tools to categories that serve conceptual definition and the production of an analytical narrative.

⁶ Besides the ability to ask the right (type of) questions at the right time (see Charmaz, 2002, p. 679-680 for a list of types of questions), these techniques involve asking for details, examples, and elaboration; posing open and actively formulated questions; using markers (i.e. coming back on a topic that seems important that came up during talking about something else); managing transitions of question topics; being alert to respondent (emotional) signals; not intruding the respondent’s story; and talking about yourself if the respondent asks you something, briefly, yet without disclosure (Weiss, 1994).

The final step of the grounded theory analysis process is theoretical sampling. The researcher returns to the collected data and/or to the field for additional data with the established theoretical categories in order to reconfirm their presence and refine their properties and links to the broader context (Charmaz, 2006). Comparative analysis is an important technique in this stage by the comparison of data with data and with theories. Data collection and analysis is less open-ended and more guided by the emerged theoretical categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The researcher tries to find the boundaries of the emerged theories, their defining elements, possible flaws, and new insights. In that way, the research proceeds towards an integrated explanation of the causal mechanisms that underlie the studied case.

To conclude, this section has explicated how in-depth interviewing, coding, memo-writing, and theoretical sampling, provide rigorous and systematic procedures that enhance the quality of the collected data as well as the analysis. The methods and techniques of grounded theory analysis guide the inductive analysis of respondents' narratives towards the construction of theoretical understandings of their practices. The next section will explain how an understanding of practices facilitates a deeper understanding in theoretical and practical terms.

PRACTICAL DILEMMAS

As it has become clear from the previous section how theory follows from practice in grounded theory analysis, it seems only natural that the flow of information and insight is also reversed. The community participation literature has been an exceptionally fruitful venue for a wide variety of attempts at bridging theory and practice for the sake of practical learning and improvement (see e.g. Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Flyvbjerg, 2002; Kensen, 2003; Laws & Hajer, 2006). However, the procedures through which these approaches operate are often unclear, unsystematic, or heavily context-dependent. Without negating the potential of these approaches, this section presents a focus on 'practical dilemmas' as a more concrete approach to facilitating practical learning. It is argued that the practical dilemmas explicated through grounded theory analysis have important added value on a scientific and practical level, because explication of practices embodies understanding of the theoretical underlying causal mechanisms as well as exposure of its practical dilemmas, tensions, and inconsistencies.

The great amount of attention for practical learning and improvement in the community participation literature is related to the emphasis in community participation on

collaboration, mutual learning, reciprocity, etc. The study of public administration is in particular fit for bridging theory and practice, because one of its defining features is the desire to develop a conceptually rigorous and empirically grounded scientific approach (Simon, 1946) in conjunction with having an added value for the practice of public administration (Rutgers, 1993). The practices found through grounded theory analysis are in particular useful for this purpose, because they are abstracted from empirical data and yet remain embedded in the data (Charmaz, 2002). Theories maintain a constant connection with the level of practice as theoretical insights are illustrated by empirical examples, so that it can be understood how theoretical insights affect practical dilemmas and vice versa.

Practices should thus not be understood as general theories, but rather as middle range theories that transcend the single case level without getting too remote from the empirical findings. The goal is to provide rich and detailed accounts of the cases without getting entangled in descriptive holism. Rather than providing concrete empirical descriptions, “the logic of analysis is developed in terms of the elements of social structure” (Merton, 1968, pp. 43-44), i.e. the underlying causal mechanisms⁷. The goal is not pure holistic description of cases, nor formulation of universalistic statements, but rather to identify the factors, interdependencies, and circumstances that need to be taken into account in order to understand (i.e. make sense of) particular cases. Thus, middle range theory avoids relativism, while neither aspiring to show how A leads to outcome B in system S under circumstances X, Y, and Z (Hempel, 1962/2006). There are too many relevant factors, interdependencies, and events, which are moreover in constant change, to formulate such grand statements. Hence, there is always a *potential* for variety in outcomes. In order to nevertheless formulate meaningful general statements, middle range theory aims *to reveal the mechanisms that generate these variable outcomes* (Weick, 1974; George & Bennet, 2004):

“middle-range theory is not concerned with the historical generalization that a degree of social order or conflict prevails in society but with the analytical problem of identifying the social mechanisms which produce a greater degree of order or less conflict than would obtain if these mechanisms were not called into play” (Merton, 1968, p. 45).

⁷ Although often loosely employed, causal mechanisms form a clear and systematic operational analytical model for middle range theories. The causal mechanisms model distinguishes three conceptual stages, which subsequently specify (1) how institutions provide a decision making setting for individuals, (2) how individual ideas and preferences within this setting lead to specific actions, and (3) how these individual actions aggregate into collective level changes (Coleman, 1986, 1990; Hedström & Swedberg, 1996). This tripartite model has the potential of generating fine-grained, deep, and direct explanations of change processes that link macro level institutional circumstances, individual frames and actions, and collective practices.

Thus, on a scientific level, the identification of practices does not imply the presentation of a number of relevant causal factors, but rather the explication of the ways in which different factors, interdependencies, and events are connected through a causal mechanism. That is, it is explicated how the understandings and concomitant actions of practitioners connect factors that derive from the macro-context of their governance system, their organization, the local multi-actor network, the societal system, and the concrete situation at hand. This integrative capacity of practices implies that different dimensions can be confronted to reconcile insights as well as reveal tensions and inconsistencies (cf. Rutgers, 1993, 1998; Raadschelders, 2003). Beyond the creation of new theoretical insights on a scientific level, the explication of tensions and inconsistencies makes clear how the daily work of practitioners is governed by *practical dilemmas*: the need to make practical decisions about ways to harness issues which are difficult or impossible to completely overcome.

A focus on practical dilemmas implies that it is clarified how practitioners' frames and actions direct their understanding and behavior towards certain outcomes. Administrative practice is filled with uncertainties, wicked problems, and complicated solutions, which implies that practitioners construct their practices based on perceptions of events, values, and causal beliefs that are inevitably limited and serve to support a particular line of action. The point is not to simply point at the advantages, disadvantages, and unanticipated consequences of their practices, but rather to clarify the dynamics of the process in which they are involved, the dilemmas that are part of this process, and how their practices respond to these dilemmas.

For example, a practitioner's narrative can contain a 'story of decline'⁸ to legitimate practices of intervention in an allegedly deprived neighborhood, while the empirical basis for deterioration might be weak or absent. The point of the focus on practical dilemmas is not to criticize the discrepancy between practices and the empirical situation, but rather to explicate where the idea of deterioration originated from, how it became an accepted practice, and how this practice affects the practitioner's work and the status of the neighborhood. For instance, the idea of deterioration can have emerged from the policy rhetoric behind the will to initiate a community participation project on the side of local government. It can become an accepted practice because the particular neighborhood proved to be most appropriate for intervention based on several administrative criteria and negotiation within an extensive selection process. It can aggravate relationships between local government and neighborhood, when in a

⁸ A story of decline is a narrative that follows the following line of reasoning: "In the beginning, things were pretty good. But they got worse. In fact, right now, they are nearly intolerable. Something must be done" (Stone, 2002, p. 138).

subsequent participation project local residents feel offended and stigmatized by the idea of deterioration and the public professionals feel frustrated by the lack of acknowledgment for their efforts to improve things for the residents.

In such a hypothetical case, it is not a matter of putting the blame somewhere, but rather to raise mutual awareness of the inevitable dilemmas, tensions, and inconsistencies of administrative practice. Practical dilemmas need to be explicated, understood, and learned from. Therefore, the practical dilemmas approach is structured along the lines of the 'Community of Inquiry' (Shields, 2003): an organizing principle for scholars and practitioners of public administration to "examine how they approach problems, consider data, and communicate" (p. 511). The Community of Inquiry is an "open-ended process with positive feedback" (p. 519) that is primarily focused on finding an approach to problematical situations. It seeks to provide an approach to deal with practical dilemmas, instead of imposing 'one-best-way' solutions, by connecting practice with theory. The main line of inquiry consists a 'scientific attitude', i.e. "the controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation". This scientific line of inquiry can be put in other words as the grounded theory analysis of administrative practice in order to arrive at a theoretical understanding of its practices and dilemmas. This theoretical understanding, then, needs to be used to stimulate practitioners to reflect on their practices (understandings and actions).

The practical dilemmas approach follows the methods of the 'Community of Inquiry', because it is a way to enable productive discussion and learning. It does not dictate answers, but only facilitates a process of reflection by providing questions and explicating tensions (cf. Noordegraaf, 2006). To go back to the hypothetical case above, how has the label of deterioration affected the perception of the neighborhood and the policy measures selected? Does the emphasis on participation and collaboration conceal any fundamental power inequalities, organizational decision making structures, or financial deficiencies that inhibit cooperation? How has the identification of different societal groups and their needs affected the interpersonal interactions and outcomes of the participation process? Such questions are obviously precarious to ask, as they require from practitioners the willingness to let go of belief systems, and the capacity to listen, to learn, and to reflect on ideas, actions, and vocabulary. Thus, the process has to be carefully guided by a person sensitive to the intricacies of learning and administrative practice and able to direct the process towards clear learning goals. Moreover, it also implies a commitment on the side of the practitioners to be open to learning, and to have a scientific patience in the acquisition of information and insights in advance of the learning process (Stivers, 1994; Shields, 2003).

In conclusion, the practices identified through grounded theory analysis have great potential to enhance practical learning and improvement. The focus on practical dilemmas offers an approach to raising awareness of dilemmas, tensions, and inconsistencies in the public encounters of community participation. This section has explained how the focus on practical dilemmas, in line with the broader analytical framework of this paper, entails an open-ended feedback process that facilitates reflection by linking theory and practice.

CONCLUSION

This paper has set out to present an analytical framework to study the public encounters of community participation. The main argument is that public encounters need to be analyzed in terms of practices: the ways in which practitioners understand their daily work situation at hand and act upon this understanding. It has been demonstrated how the practices approach can lead to new theoretical insights about how community participation works and can also aid practical learning, as a focus on practices can reveal how macro and micro level factors, interdependencies, and events are connected. On a scientific level, the practices approach does not merely add some causal factors to the already extensive literature, but rather has the potential to enhance our understanding of community participation by explicating the underlying causal mechanisms that generate varying outcomes. On a practical level, the practices approach does not simply provide one-best-way solutions or stimulate excessive learning, but rather facilitates guided reflection on the practical dilemmas, tensions, and inconsistencies of administrative practice. The analytical framework of this paper secures that insights about public encounters are ‘grounded’ in practice.

It has to be emphasized that it is of great importance to understand and judge community participation, as well as public sector reform in general, in terms of practices. Although administrative reforms are situated in the context of macro level reforms, the impact and nature of reforms such as community participation only become clear from the ways in which practitioners understand them and act upon them within practical situations. Administrative reforms take shape in unintentional and accidental ways during implementation, because practical situations force practitioners to make sense of a reform in relation to many macro and micro level factors (cf. Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973/1984; Hjern & Porter, 1981; Rein, 1983). Pre-conceived (normatively inspired) theories or political rhetoric often distort our understanding by overstating or oversimplifying the causes and

amount of actual change. An open-ended and inductive approach that evaluates the effects of a reform on practices seems more sensible.

To be sure, one might object that such broad conclusions cannot be drawn from one or a few cases. It could be argued that inductive research is too sensitive to context and interpretation to reflect on a reform as a whole or the broader debate about state-society relations. However, large-N deductive research is not per definition more capable to reach intelligent and valid conclusions, nor is it less sensitive to the millions of practical choices made by the researcher or the nature of the sample that is studied. Deductive research works with different methods and techniques than inductive research, and each approach has trade-offs (Gerring, 2007). Inductive research runs the risk of overestimating discovered causal relationships if the case(s) is(/are) not really representative for the broader phenomenon under study. Increasing the number of cases can reduce problems of external validity, but can again endanger the internal validity. Reducing the degree of intensity with which the case is studied enhances the risk on wrong conclusions based on chance, measurement error, or overlooked alternative explanations. Thus, there rather seems to be a need for deductive and inductive approaches to complement each other and engage in constructive dialogue in order to enhance our understanding of administrative practice.

Limits to the practices approach such as the predicaments of case selection, the time-consuming nature of the data collection and analysis, and the ambitious outlook on contributing to science and practice are certainly acknowledged. Moreover, the usefulness of the practices approach has yet to be proved in practice. Still, the current exploration shows that the practices approach is promising for understanding how community participation processes work, how decisions are made, and whether decision making is more effective, equal, and fair. Small discoveries can reveal big truths (Flyvbjerg, 2002). In the end, insight on the nature of modern public encounters within the broader context of social justice, equity, and government performance (King & Stivers, 1998) seem to be a matter of how practitioners deal with the ways in which these big questions translate into concrete practical dilemmas.

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