The unbearable lightness of citizens within public deliberation processes

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Abstract

There is a growing literature examining the involvement of citizens in health policymaking. While determining what form such involvement should take and who should participate is of particular interest to policymakers and researchers, the current ontological understanding of what a citizen is suffers from “lightness.” This essay thus seeks to provide more depth by shedding light on the ways in which individuals define what “being” a citizen means for them and choose to embody or not such a role. Inspired by a four-year ethnographic study of a Canadian science/policy network in genetics, which integrated citizens into its operation, this paper provides four biographical sketches that portray the complexity and richness of what these individuals were “made of.” We reflect on how they sought to make sense of their participation in the network by drawing on a repertoire of cultural, relational and cognitive resources and on their lived experience. Their capacity to “be” a participant and to be acknowledged as such by the others was shaped by their values and interests and by the contributions they sought to realise throughout their participation. Our discussion suggests that the quest for the “ordinary” citizen is misleading. Instead, acknowledging the sociological concreteness of citizenship and understanding how it may be embodied and exercised should be a key focus in public involvement theory and practice in health care.

Introduction: what does being a citizen mean?

In the growing literature examining the involvement of citizens or members of the public in policymaking, understanding what form such involvement should take and who should participate is of particular interest to policymakers and health services and policy researchers (Abelson, Montesanti, Li, Gauvin, & Martin, 2010). Given the complexity of the policy issues that may be amenable to research, it is of particular interest to policymakers and health services and policy researchers, the current ontological understanding of what a citizen is suffers from “lightness.” This essay thus seeks to provide more depth by shedding light on the ways in which individuals define what “being” a citizen means for them and choose to embody or not such a role. Inspired by a four-year ethnographic study of a Canadian science/policy network in genetics, which integrated citizens into its operation, this paper provides four biographical sketches that portray the complexity and richness of what these individuals were “made of.” We reflect on how they sought to make sense of their participation in the network by drawing on a repertoire of cultural, relational and cognitive resources and on their lived experience. Their capacity to “be” a participant and to be acknowledged as such by the others was shaped by their values and interests and by the contributions they sought to realise throughout their participation. Our discussion suggests that the quest for the “ordinary” citizen is misleading. Instead, acknowledging the sociological concreteness of citizenship and understanding how it may be embodied and exercised should be a key focus in public involvement theory and practice in health care.

The quest for the “ordinary, disinterested” citizen

The aim of the science/policy network that inspired our reflection was to facilitate knowledge transfer and exchange and the
production of applicable, user-friendly knowledge. When its members decided to integrate four citizens into the network’s regular operations, they formally excluded those who could be seen as too “interested” in genetics such as activists, patients or their relatives. Their goal was to enrich deliberations by bringing their opinions should be gathered. Their selection strategy is not surprising when one considers the literature on public involvement, which tends to locate the issues at play along two interrelated axes: 1) pondering the expertise and/or 2) gathering experiential knowledge that may differ from, yet be in alignment with, the views are being elicited (Abelson et al., 2003). Perhaps because public involvement is often seen as a means to: 1) elicit values that are thought to belong to the social realm (i.e., so-called social values); and/or 2) gather experiential knowledge that may differ from, yet complement expert knowledge, deliberative processes that seek to establish a two-way communication channel between participants and those who are seeking input are posited as conducive to the development of more informed and eventually consensual opinions (Abelson et al., 2010). Within this deliberative democracy perspective (Bohn, 1996), citizens should be able to articulate their views and change their mind when presented with convincing arguments. Some scholars in fact conceive of deliberation as an “elicitation technology” by which the malleability of opinions may in and of itself represent an indicator of success (Lezau & Soneryd, 2007). Not surprisingly, when the process tends to prevail over the content and consensus is sought, those who present a limited potential for change would be a priori excluded, while the “right” participants would be those who might not hold on too firmly to their personal ideals or interests. Here, citizens are constructed as Cartesian individuals, or “reason giving” people as Black (2008) puts it, whose opinions should evolve if exposed to sensible counter-arguments. Such a “dispassionate” deliberation process may be viewed as an ideal model, exemplar because of its reassuring rationality and of its politely policed politics (Barnes, 2008). However, within this perspective, citizens are expected in a somewhat ontologically disembodied way to show flexibility in their thinking and normative assumptions, as if who they are is not in any way relevant to what they value and know about a particular issue.

To summarise, an ontologically shallow understanding of citizenship seems to prevail, something that is both puzzling and problematic. It is puzzling because of the very arguments voiced in favour of public involvement emphasising the intrinsic qualities of the ordinary citizen’s input, such as its putative detachment and/or ability to represent a communitarian perspective (Martin, 2008b). It is problematic because it may reinforce an assumption that posits citizens as reservoirs of disembodied opinions, waiting to be tapped by an elicitation instrument, which is not equipped to account for the substantive properties of citizens. By putting some empirical flesh around the bones of citizenship, this paper thus seeks to clarify the ontological “thickness” of citizens and articulate how who they are relates to what makes them potentially relevant and legitimate spokespersons.
Looking at citizen involvement through a biographical lens

Conceptualising what pushes individuals to engage in civic movements, Stangherlin’s biographical approach (2006) offers a helpful heuristic device. Stangherlin suggests that a given public engagement experience is structured, on the one hand, by the participants’ biographical resources and, on the other, by the capacity of the organisational setting to exploit these resources meaningfully. His framework emphasises four resources. First, “cultural resources” refer to the individual’s educational, socio-economic and occupational assets. For instance, education may lead to the development of communication and organisational skills and paid work is a form of social integration influencing one’s self-esteem and the development of a range of competencies as well as a sense of self-efficacy. Second, “relational resources” are linked to one’s social networks, which influence the nature and scope of the civic issues a person will be both exposed to and engaged in, contributing to the formation of one’s identity and normative dispositions. Third, “cognitive resources” are related to the knowledge one may possess and acquire and to the ideological frameworks that provide meaning to that knowledge. These resources are constituted by what an individual knows about a given issue and by the values, norms, and political or religious ideologies born by this person. These resources not only make accessible and meaningful certain types of information about a social issue, but they also contribute to build symbolically the motive one may pursue through civic activity. Finally, one’s “lived experience” may push a person to experiment with, and choose certain types of civic engagement that resonate with his or her life trajectory. This framework thus refocuses our attention on the unique, multifaceted dimensions of individuals that shape their capacity to “exist” as citizens within a public involvement setting.

The science/policy network

The citizens described in this paper participated in a science/policy network in genetics, which we call GeNet (a pseudonym). This network was launched in 2003 by researchers who had applied successfully to a peer-reviewed funding initiative of the Canadian Institutes of Health Research. The network comprised more than 30 members including university-based researchers, clinicians, policymakers and researchers from advisory bodies, located in four provinces in eastern Canada. The network’s aims were to support transdisciplinary policy-oriented research and to foster knowledge transfer and use in policymaking. All GeNet members met twice a year for one day, while sub-groups met more frequently to collaborate on specific projects. The biannual meetings had a very busy agenda and included formal presentations by guest speakers. Members spoke in French or English (using simultaneous translation).

“Civic dialogue,” alongside “genetic health services organisation” and “genetics and public health” was one area of focus of GeNet. The network members chose to walk their talk about civic dialogue by integrating citizens into the network. After many discussions, and two years into the network’s operations, its members recruited four citizens, capable of engaging in deliberations. They were not to be affiliated with any formal organisations within the sector of genetics and health professionals were excluded since the goal was for members to be confronted by a disinterested “rationality” (their term) that would differ from that of experts (GeNet’s leaders used interchangeably the terms “citizen” and “non-expert”).

Following a meticulous selection process, including a meeting with a large number of potential participants, three men and one woman were invited to their first GeNet meeting. The network’s leaders provided them with some basic information about the network and the field of genetics. In the leaders’ mind, given the ethical dimensions at play, it was important not to influence the citizens’ point of view, to keep it fresh and unaltered. From this point on, the citizens were treated mostly like the other expert members.

Data sources and analysis

Our research team conducted an ethnographic case study of GeNet, which covered all of its activities from its launch until its disbandment (in 2008). Three main sources of data inform the reflections conveyed in this paper. First, all the network meetings were systematically observed either by the second author (GD) alone or by both GD and the first author (PL). By doing so, we documented the discussions that led to the integration of citizens and the discussions that happened afterwards. We observed and recorded notes on all members’ interventions during the formal activities as well as interactions in informal situations, such as coffee and lunch breaks. The discussions of two one-day meetings were audio-recorded and transcribed. Second, GD conducted interviews with three of the four citizens (questionnaire available upon request). One citizen who had accepted our invitation withdrew from the network a few days later and, because of time constraints, the interview did not take place. The phone interviews lasted around 90 min; they were recorded and transcribed verbatim with the consent of the interviewee (research ethics approval was obtained from University of Montreal). Third, we received correspondence from citizens and asked for their feedback before submitting papers for publication.

To analyse this material, we adopted an interpretative approach, paying attention to the narratives of the informants as well as those of the ethnographers (Bruner, 1986). The notes were particularly helpful to situate our own perspective as observers of the situations described in the interviews and as observers of the relations between all members of the network. We used Stangherlin’s framework to portray each citizen and examine the relationship he or she established with GeNet (for an analysis of the impact of the network’s governance on the citizens see Daudelin, Lehoux, Abelson, & Denis, 2011).

Four biographical sketches

Alain, Robert, Marc and Pauline (pseudonyms) possessed multiple biographical resources and developed a unique way of “being” in GeNet.

Alain, the passionate self-made scientist

Alain’s cultural resources are diverse. Self-taught, he developed over time a substantial knowledge of genetics and molecular biology. Trained in accounting, he owns a small enterprise, located in a medium-sized town. He defines himself as being “curious, somewhat passionate as well” (Interview). He is fluent in French and English and reads German, which grants him access to many learning sources, beyond those usually available to a Canadian public. In addition to holding scientific, entrepreneurial and language skills, he enjoys reading and reflecting about complex questions.

Alain is married and has children. These relational resources are a catalyst and a transmission channel for his learning quests. The questions asked by his children about life’s origins and human evolution have been the starting point of his interest in genetics, which later became a passion. Alain’s discourse contains a recurrent motif by which he identifies strongly with scientists. Once the GeNet experience will be over, “it will not stop me from pursuing...
my own research in the domain” (Interview). He also ascribes to researchers traits he uses to define himself: “since they’re scientists, I imagine they’re passionate about their domain and are curious” (Interview).

Whereas scientific knowledge clearly constitutes a core value in Alain’s life, the cognitive resources displayed through his narrative closely interfere learning, rationality and progress. Being self-taught, his life philosophy is subsumed in three words: “invention, creativity and development” (Interview). Fascinated by genetics, he is convinced it will generate progress, that future developments “will astonish us” and that they will occur in many areas beyond medicine. Prudence is certainly necessary, but “it would be difficult to stop people from being curious” (Interview). Scientific knowledge and its application are manifestations of human creativity and must therefore be constrained as little as possible. For him, the creationist philosophy is clearly a greater threat than its rational opposite. Alain’s strong belief in rationality brings him as far as explaining how he developed, through his readings, a non-anthropocentric worldview (correspondence, March 5, 2008).

Alain’s lived experience as far as it concerns the health care system or genetics diseases is limited since he never had health problems and his professional daily life brings him closer to business matters. Furthermore, until he participated in GeNet, his knowledge about genetics excluded medical aspects.

Alain’s relationship with GeNet: a quasi-insider

Alain was visibly more comfortable than the other citizens within GeNet and he enjoyed its scientific endeavour:

Since I began participating in [GeNet], my readings have increasingly been focused on the life sciences. And more progress I make, and more I doubt that the biped with a large head that nearly rips open his mother when he comes to life can be considered the apogee of the creation. And I wonder whether life scientists do not also think likewise (correspondence, March 5, 2008).

If Alain seems to identify with some expert members of GeNet more than the other citizens, it is not due to a condescending attitude towards his fellow citizens. According to him, they have been well chosen and that implies being rational, believing in scientific reasoning and not being refractory to innovation. Citizens do not have to be scientists themselves because their attention and craftsmanship in working with words and symbols, helped him make sense of his presence within the network, which was one of his relationship with GeNet: the reflective witness

Robert’s cultural resources, which translate into a clear capacity and craftsmanship in working with words and symbols, helped him make sense of his presence within the network, which was one of a puzzling yet careful observer. At the first meeting, Robert expressed doubts: “It’s not yet clear to me, your notion [pause] of civic representation [laughs], personally I don’t really know what I can [pause], well I trust you, I guess we could be useful” (Transcript, Network meeting, September 30, 2005). Then, throughout his journey, the network’s goals and rationale were matters of inquiry for Robert.

Defining the citizen’s role within GeNet is like a puzzle to be solved. The most reasonable posture for Robert is that of a “witness,” which could be appropriate and consistent with his wish for transparent policymaking. The problem he encounters, however, is the absence of any “testifying channel”:

It creates an ethical issue for me [laughs], between a witness and a voyeur, there may not be a great distinction. Being a witness implies the capacity to testify, and I don’t have any channel for testifying. Well, I don’t see any, or I don’t search for any. So, I feel that my presence isn’t complete, that I don’t fulfil my role (Interview).

Realising that a piece of the puzzle is missing, Robert adopts a discrete yet attentive posture within GeNet. He is not afraid to intervene, but it is his presence that performs as a “sign,” a reminder to the expert members of the people they work for. Since Robert greatly
values symbols, adopting this position is not a self-deprecating posture. He believes that citizens could play an important role in scientific developments. He recognises, however, that the complexity of the health care system and of genetics may be discouraging for the “little citizen,” engendering a sense of impotence.

Robert’s cultural and cognitive resources contribute to provide some meaning to his involvement, but it remains an unsatisfying experience (e.g., feeling like a stranger, an “alien”). He is conscious of his individuality, and strongly feels that he is not representative of the broader citizenry. Providing an opinion that would simply draw on his individual experience and thoughts is not valuable in his own eyes (Observation notes, April 13, 2007). In contrast, the arguments of the expert members are based on their professional practice (as researchers, clinicians or managers), which implies a continuous involvement and provides them with a significant amount of knowledge. Citizens are not immersed on a daily basis in such issues and, at each and every meeting, have to “reconstruct” their interest in genetics (which in his case diminishes over time).

For Robert, there is a crucial difference between experts and citizens, one that makes him see a profound problem of legitimacy within GeNet. Overall, his embodiment of a citizen’s role is that of someone who watches the group more than he is incorporated within it. As the network did not mobilise Robert’s resources, he remained distant, yet symbolically present.

Marc, the socially conscientious man

Holding an undergraduate degree in biology that included some basic genetics, Marc worked as a paramedic for a number of years. At the time of our study, he is a manager of first-response services in a regional health board where his duties include delivering training programs. He acquired skills in management and teaching and he is pursuing graduate studies in public health. Marc is familiar with written culture and speaks French and English. His oral communication skills are significant and he converses with other persons with ease. His cultural resources also include reflecting, structuring ideas and conveying complex content to apprentices.

The relational resources Marc spoke about are primarily of a community type. He defines himself as a citizen, that is a person actively and consciously situated in his society, who relates to others and does things with other members of society. As a member of such a collective entity, he did not hesitate to represent citizens in GeNet and to “speak for” them.

Among other cognitive resources, Marc ascribes great value to intellectual work, academic activity and scientific research. But in contrast with Alain, Marc’s conception of science is framed within a critical perspective, one that draws heavily on social and ethical considerations:

Science evolves within a social context and I believe that we can’t do as if this context didn’t exist. [...] Because every single decision we make means there will be less resources available for something else. Thus, obviously it becomes an ethical issue, a political issue as well, those things [...] well, aren’t just technical issues (Interview).

Marc possesses a long and rich lived experience of involvement in various community groups, which he frames as a responsibility: “as a citizen, I believe that it’s my civic duty to participate in society in different ways, and [being involved in GeNet] is one way of doing this” (Interview). He also feels equipped to do so: “Over time, you come to realise that there are ways of doing things that can be found in different types of meetings and committees [...] When you understand this dynamic, it helps you bring a greater contribution” (Interview). Marc’s relationship with GeNet: trying to make space for the citizens’ voice

At the first meeting, Marc’s motivation was clear: “the citizen’s opinion must be given. And I’m here to do that” (Transcript, Network meeting, September 30, 2005). For Marc, being a citizen means being active, contributing by talking, perhaps influencing the other members and being useful. It also means having some power as a citizen, equal to that of the other members, and being treated as an autonomous subject rather than an object of experts’ discourses. Referring to the inability of GeNet's leaders to clarify the citizens’ space, Marc says:

It’s a bit like [...] there’s a dinner for adults and usually there’s a table for the kids aside. But here they decided to invite the children to the adults’ table. But they've discussed it amongst adults before! [laughs] [...]. At times I feel a little like I’m a circus animal (Interview).

Marc sees this unequal situation between experts and citizens as irritating and disrespectful to the citizens whose integrity as persons and ability to speak for themselves were being compromised. Marc wanted to make a significant contribution. His goal was to enlighten the expert members’ understanding with a well-defined citizen’s perspective, one that would prove relevant and useful. As a healthcare system manager and a biology sciences graduate, Marc is familiar with several content issues addressed during the meetings. Nevertheless, the frustration he felt was significant when he witnessed exchanges in which citizens had difficulty taking part because of their lack of specialised knowledge and capacity to react “on the spot”: “there are so many things about which we’ve never questioned ourselves. [...] we have to forge an opinion on everything, and this doesn’t always happen at the meeting itself” (Interview).

Through his participation in GeNet meetings, he discovered unknown and interesting aspects of the scientific research world but “even if academic thinking is interesting in itself, it can be socially ill-adapted” (Interview). According to him, citizen involvement is crucial because the choices with which society is confronted in health care should provoke philosophical discussions. Discussing the network’s priorities in its early stage would have been the very area in which Marc felt he (and the other citizens) could have been really useful and competent, and from which GeNet could have benefitted. After the citizens were integrated, the discussions were “way more technical” and “there wasn’t in fact much discussion.” Researchers “come to present what they’ve done. We can ask questions, but to what end?” (Interview). Overall, while Marc had a clear vision of what citizenship entails, there was not much space for the citizen’s voice to be articulated and heard.

Pauline, the engaged “decliner”

Since Pauline was not interviewed, her biographical resources can only be roughly summarised. Because she withdrew from the network, examining her way of trying to find a proper place to be in GeNet is nevertheless instructive.

Pauline was trained and is professionally active in the socio-community realm. Over the years, she developed an expertise in social intervention, social work and education. When she applied to GeNet, she was interested primarily in citizen involvement itself, especially within what she called “complex organisations,” i.e., requiring knowledge and addressing complex issues such as public health and genetics. She made this interest explicit at the first meeting: “No matter the content, the very idea of having a space for the citizen’s voice, this is extremely appealing to me. Then, as a social worker, I’ll be interested in the content as much as in the form, the manner in which things will unfold” (Transcript, Network
meeting, September 30, 2005). However, in contrast to social, ethical or educational issues, genetics and scientific issues do not really appeal to Pauline.

She participated predominantly as an observer of members' discussions, a posture she called a "meta-position," which allowed her to evaluate the relationship between GeNet and the citizens. Unsurprisingly, she noted very soon a gap between the citizen participation she had envisioned and the possibility of realising it within the context of GeNet. At her first meeting, Pauline made remarks and shared several reflections. Like Marc, she became acutely aware of the lack of space for the "citizen's voice." From the moment the four citizens were integrated, their presence was not an issue anymore. Because citizen involvement represented one of Pauline's key cultural resources, she made concrete propositions to GeNet's leaders, aiming to improve the ability of the four citizens to come up with more solid and eventually consensual opinions that could be shared with the expert members. However, those proposed changes to the network's deliberative processes were not implemented.

After two and a half years, she decided to withdraw from GeNet. While she missed only the last network meeting, her formal and physical withdrawal was the last manifestation of a posture that had been "above" the network for some time. When invited to comment on a draft paper we intended to submit for publication, Pauline explained how "the rigid structure of the meetings" precluded real debates from taking place. She argued that the leaders' idea that "the citizen's voice could be expressed spontaneously, without any form of preparation" undermined the very possibility of expressing opinions that mattered ("had teeth") (correspondence, July 6, 2008). Furthermore, she mentioned that the citizens' perspective might have to do with "something beyond the self," that it must be protected from the likely temptation to use a public involvement setting as a platform "for a more or less conscious narcissistic quest." Hence, for her, the "problem of the citizen's voice" is also to be found in the very humanness of citizens, including perhaps their ego. Overall, although she appreciated her exchanges with the network's leaders and members who all showed a warm, genuine receptivity, the "disenchantment [she] went through from one meeting to another" was palpable and increasingly untenable (correspondence, July 6, 2008). This is why we believe that Pauline took a stand and voted with her feet.

Discussion: acknowledging the ontological richness of citizens

The biographical sketches explored the multiple layers that constitute citizens, seeking to articulate what they were "made of" with the contributions they sought to make. As Schnapper (1997) aptly suggests, while the "citizen" is a construct, an abstraction that refers to a political order, individuals who form the polity are concrete. She argues that citizens, when considered from a sociological lens, are bonded through direct interactions, share to various degrees a common history, set of values and beliefs, and may belong or be "attached" to more than one community. Here, citizenship is necessarily plural and historically situated because of its cultural and affective dimensions. From a political theory perspective, citizens exist in relation to a sovereign political authority (i.e., a national government) wherein they choose through an election process those who govern and who, by delegation, represent their interests. Because every citizen is seen as holding equal rights and obligations, citizenship here refers to a universal, disembodied abstraction. Hence, by examining citizens in their sociological concreteness, this paper suggests that: 1) being "interested" is integral to being "involved"; and 2) asking whether or not such participants are "representative" of a broader citizenry is misleading.

Although the citizens we examined did not have any vested interest, they carried multiple interests; while some of these can be considered public-spirited (Abelson et al., 2003), others are inherent to their biographical quest. As Table 1 summarises, their ability to "be" within this network was uneven, not simply because of its shortcomings. Their varying resources structured and gave meaning to their involvement in GeNet; from Alain's quasi-insider position to Pauline's gradual withdrawal, we purposefully highlighted different degrees in the embodiment of a citizen's role. Alain enjoyed his experience and was an active participant in his own eyes as well as in those of expert members. He succeeded more than the other citizens in realising his personal goals: learning and sharing knowledge. Describing himself as both a witness and a voyeur, Robert's intellectual curiosity may have been partly satisfied. Although quite articulate and reflective, his knowledge and resources were however barely mobilised and he could not direct what he witnessed and learned during his journey with GeNet. Marc was clearly interested in speaking on behalf of citizens and influencing expert members. Being familiar

Table 1
A summary of the four citizens' embodiment of citizenship in GeNet.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key biographical resources</th>
<th>Alain, the passionate self-made scientist</th>
<th>Robert, the creative philosopher</th>
<th>Marc, the socially conscientious man</th>
<th>Pauline, the engaged decliner</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-thought and eager to learn about genetics</td>
<td>Expertise with language, symbols and their role in human interactions</td>
<td>Expertise in training, committee &quot;work&quot; and community organisation</td>
<td>Expertise in social work and education</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Positive outlook on scientific developments</td>
<td>Critical outlook on scientific developments</td>
<td>Critical outlook on scientific developments</td>
<td>Critical outlook on scientific developments</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The enthusiasm of one who wants to decipher how genetics will affect health care</td>
<td>An understanding of the health care system as a public good that deserves to be taken care of by citizens</td>
<td>An interest in how humans respond to value conflicts</td>
<td>An interest in the social and ethical aspects of genetics</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception of citizenship</td>
<td>A term that is politically dubious (&quot;French Revolution&quot;)</td>
<td>Something that sits uncomfortably between the rise of individualism and the search for the common good</td>
<td>A positive, wise entity that needs to be empowered</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A term that is politically dubious (&quot;French Revolution&quot;)</td>
<td>The curiosity of scientists is something to value, not necessarily to scrutinize publicly</td>
<td>Scientists and policymakers ought to be publicly accountable to citizens</td>
<td>Scientists and policymakers ought to be publicly accountable to citizens</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The curiosity of scientists is something to value, not necessarily to scrutinize publicly</td>
<td>Quasi-insider whose proximity with researchers is acknowledged</td>
<td>Reflective witness who remains distant, seeking a &quot;channel for testifying&quot; and struggling with the legitimacy of his presence in GeNet</td>
<td>Trying to make space for the citizens' voice and struggling with the power imbalance associated to the asymmetry of expertise</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Way of &quot;being&quot; in GeNet</td>
<td>Trying to make space for the citizens' voice and struggling with the power imbalance associated to the asymmetry of expertise</td>
<td>Trying to make space for the citizens' voice, then exiting as a civic posture</td>
<td>Trying to make space for the citizens' voice, then exiting as a civic posture</td>
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</tr>
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with committee-like dynamics, Marc nevertheless struggled with the asymmetry of power and expertise that prevailed. Finally, Pauline saw the citizen’s voice as pivotal in and of itself and wanted to further develop her expertise in this domain. She realised that this would not happen and did not see how her competencies could be made relevant to the tasks at hand.

Hence, these four citizens were far from being “disinterested,” something that could hardly be held against them considering the efforts required of them (Learmonth et al., 2009). The interests we described cannot be separated from the values and knowledge participants embody and which may be mobilised more or less successfully by a given public involvement setting, depending on its goal and communication tools. While GeNet adopted a peculiar, research-driven hybrid structure bringing together both experts and non-experts, the cultural and cognitive resources of the four citizens shaped their capacity to exist within this network and to be considered as such by the other members. Alain shared with several expert members a positive outlook on the development of genetics and did not feel the need to foster critical appraisals of its pursuits. Considering the rich material they embody (i.e., providing space for their backgrownd knowledge to be shared) and become more aware of why and how their viewpoints may prove substantially similar or different (Lehoux et al., 2009). Daviexen Wetherell, and Barnett (2006) suggest that public involvement initiatives often address a specific, "hyphenated" citizen. For instance, the citizen-resident may hold a stake in the management of a local health care facility, while the citizen-service user may share relevant experiential knowledge. According to these scholars, it is easier for such participants to "know who they are, and what experience they can call on" (p.2). In contrast, when “unhyphenated” citizens are mobilised, the link between their “identity and experience is likely to be more tenuous” (p.2). Hence, our biographical sketches may help public involvement practitioners be more responsive to what citizens are made of and articulate more clearly in what ways who they are makes them relevant and legitimate participants, thereby avoiding the creation of settings that will position them as outsiders by design.

Citizens as part of the social fabric, not representative of the broader citizenry

The citizens we portrayed were all “special” in their own way. Their uniqueness, however, must not obfuscate a fundamental point: if it had not been these four individuals, it would have been four others, no less or more unique, yet typical of their times from a sociological standpoint. All of their embodiments of citizenship are informative and constitutive of the social fabric of a modern society. Would one of them be more representative of the “real” public? Such a question, we contend is not only unanswerable, but also counter-productive and manipulative (Contandriopoulos, 2004). Such a question superimposes a scientific language (e.g., scrutinising the “sample” as if the validity and generalisability of the findings depended upon it) to an empirically ill-defined problem. Research-driven public involvement initiatives like GeNet operate within a political void from a formal institutional standpoint. They do not belong to a governing authority endowed with political powers and accountable to a circumscribed polity. In other words, and beyond their unhyphenated nature, citizens are being asked to talk on behalf of a constituency, which has no existence within that particular context. Hence, criteria derived from political theory such as representativeness appear empirically misleading and do not address the ontological complexity of citizenship. Furthermore, no matter how sophisticated a selection process can be, individuals who contribute to a deliberative process—even when hosted by a governing authority—will do so from the kind of sociological concreteness we illustrated, thus disclosing (parts of) the heterogeneity of the polity. It is also worth pondering why, when it comes to expert committees, the issue of representativeness is very rarely framed in the same way, asking whether a given medical specialist is representative of the profession to which he or she belongs. Expert members pursue a range of interests that are probably also connected to their own biographical resources. Further research on public involvement could thus tap into, and seek to complement the knowledge developed by scholars of civic movements. Such efforts could focus for instance on health advocacy movements where different forms of expertise interlace, where various embodiments of citizenship operate and where technoscientific policies are actively challenged from the bottom up.

Conclusion

The public involvement literature has focused so far on the processes that could be deployed and on the selection criteria that would enable picking up the right participants given their level of expertise and/or detachment vis-à-vis the issues under discussion. One poorly addressed issue, which is a key object of inquiry, is what embodying a citizen’s perspective entails for those who are being asked to participate. By examining the heterogeneity of what citizenship meant for four individuals, instead of lightness, we found depth. These citizens sought to say and do things that mattered to them and to others and possessed multiple resources that largely went unnoticed. Overall, these citizens’ appraisal of their resources, their self-perceived capacity to be within GeNet, and their ability to achieve their goals and satisfy their interests (both altruistic and personal) combined to forge different ways of embodying a citizen’s role. Our sketches suggest that citizens may not be reducible to predefined categories, by their formal knowledge or by the stakes they might hold with respect to the topic under deliberation. Moreover, positing citizens as reservoirs of disembodied and malleable opinions may not inform the design of public involvement settings capable of acknowledging their rich complexity. This richness is what makes exercising citizenship relevant, challenging, unpredictable and worthy, and as such it could be at the forefront of public involvement research and practice.

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