Commentary

A response to Martin on the role of citizens, publics and others in participatory processes

P. Lehoux, G. Daudelin, J. Abelson

In health policy research, it may be tempting to believe that once a research proposal has been written well enough to obtain peer-review approval, relevant papers will come out of it more or less straightforwardly. Nevertheless, the writing of our article (in this issue) was far from unequivocal. Perhaps like any unplanned yet determined journey, it consisted of a learning process that began with a preliminary yet necessarily ill-informed set of notions about what this unknown territory would be like and a strong desire to get to know it better because it matters.

The core idea behind the paper—exploring what citizens “are made of”—came from a mind-bugging observation: the “unbearable lightness” of the citizen construct, which can be found in the rhetoric of most people, not just scholars and practitioners of public involvement (Lehoux, Daudelin, & Abelson, in this issue). Later, through the review process, the paper benefitted greatly from constructive observations and criticisms provided by three reviewers. And this is not simply a polite acknowledgement. Public involvement mattered to all three reviewers as well, otherwise our exchanges would have been less productive and less determined.

Likewise, Martin (in this issue) provides in his commentary many engaged and engaging arguments that should appeal to academics and practitioners for whom public involvement matters. We agree with the need for the three key components Martin discusses—purpose, choice of public to be involved and process—to be articulated as clearly as possible. Perhaps it is worth underscoring that GeNet’s leaders were also aware of this trilogy—which they articulated according to their own understanding, purposes and practical constraints—and that their inclusion of citizens was not tokenistic. For several of its members, citizen involvement mattered too.

Hence, one may wonder why being aware of the need to define purposes, publics, and processes—while being genuinely concerned about public involvement—does not automatically prevent one from falling short in some ways. We found in Martin’s commentary part of the explanation for why this might be the case. We reflect upon three features of the committed posture that condition most public involvement initiatives and that, when acknowledged constructively, may help the field move forward.

The fear that public involvement be threatened by criticisms

Martin (in this issue) suggests, on the one hand, that our paper’s key argument raises challenging issues in that it poses the search for the disinterested citizen as “unfeasible or wrong-minded.” On the other hand, Martin stresses that a policy environment “which says that public participation is always good and should permeate everything” does a disservice to the cause of meaningful public participation.
Martin exposes two undesirable extremes: too much public involvement may prove as unproductive as the absence of any democratic accountability in healthcare institutions. While we agree with this potential state of affairs, we sought in our paper to provide a compelling empirical illustration of why and how participants of public involvement initiatives may themselves come to such conclusions if the processes by which their views are sought are not attentive to what they are made of and to what they may legitimately contribute. Although GeNet proved to be an equivocal experience for the four citizens we interviewed, would they refuse to do this again? Perhaps. But, have they ceased to exist as citizens since then? Do they care less about exercising citizenship? Given the biographical sketches we provided, these four citizens are still likely to be active contributors to the polity. Why do we think so? Mainly because they care about, and are interested in doing so.

In fact, one term whose meaning we perhaps did not succeed in conveying adequately in our paper is “interest.” When we argue that the disinterested, or “ordinary” citizen does not exist per se, we are simply pointing out the illusion conveyed by this abstract category (would there be something like an “ordinary” doctor whose detached wisdom about medicine should be sought to inform policy?). Every citizen bears interests, which need to be made explicit and understood because they are part and parcel of civic life. Interests contribute to one’s biographical set of resources, such as those we commonly and positively associate with personal motivations, like being in interested in learning, travelling or contributing to a cause. Of course, biographical resources do carry other normative connotations, such as prejudices or political orientations that may interfere with a reasonable or authentic discussion around particular policy issues. The problem is that conflicting, marginalized or passionate normative preferences tend to be ignored, silenced or simply circumvented through the search for an idealized, disembodied citizen. All kinds of interests—including some we may strongly disagree with—make up the polity, and such complexity cannot be eluded.

Like in a vibrant scientific life, ideas, opinions and arguments in favour or against certain policy issues need to be made explicit, challenged and criticized. Not cherry-picked. Hence, despite the challenges our paper raises, we believe it is possible to care deeply about public involvement while remaining critically aware of its shortcomings. Citizens certainly do too.

**Could the “political” citizen supersede the “sociological” one?**

Martin found us to be “overly pessimistic over the possibility of engaging the disinterested citizens of political science” and he suggested that citizens’ juries are good examples of why and how such mechanisms are likely to bring a meaningful contribution to engaging the disinterested citizens of political science. All kinds of interests to be ignored, silenced or simply circumvented through the search for an idealized, disembodied citizen. Of course, biographical resources do carry other normative connotations, such as prejudices or political orientations that may interfere with a reasonable or authentic discussion around particular policy issues. The problem is that conflicting, marginalized or passionate normative preferences tend to be ignored, silenced or simply circumvented through the search for an idealized, disembodied citizen. All kinds of interests—including some we may strongly disagree with—make up the polity, and such complexity cannot be eluded.

Like in a vibrant scientific life, ideas, opinions and arguments in favour or against certain policy issues need to be made explicit, challenged and criticized. Not cherry-picked. Hence, despite the challenges our paper raises, we believe it is possible to care deeply about public involvement while remaining critically aware of its shortcomings. Citizens certainly do too.

**Revisiting the interventionist impulse**

When reading the headings of Martin’s commentary (i.e., “what do we want [the publics] to be?”, “how can we help them to become it”) one has to recognize that researchers—and we necessarily include ourselves here—generally share a strong interventionist impulse. In public involvement, this impulse, which may be reinforced by policymakers, translates into the urge to design mechanisms as if the very existence of the publics depended entirely upon the designers’ will.

Elsewhere (Daudelin, Lehoux, Abelson, & Denis, 2011), by carefully observing GeNet’s governance and deliberative processes, we in fact argued in favour of the design of well thought-out public involvement mechanisms. Yet, in the more recent paper, we realized that something else was missing and this is why we built on the work of Stangherlin (2006). Tapping into the knowledge developed by scholars of civic movements, e.g., bottom-up initiatives, is clearly informative because it puts aside for a moment the interventionist impulse in favour of an intellectual posture that seeks to understand why certain citizens get involved in political or social matters, and why and how they deliberately choose to exert their citizenship or not. Bridging this literature with research that seeks to understand how the identity of various publics may be “translated into a specific role through the process of public participation” would in fact enable the “greater, and more critical, consideration” Martin calls for.

**Conclusion**

We are grateful to Martin for his additional insights into this important topic and we hope that our paper will not be interpreted as overly pessimistic. There is no need to fear that public involvement will be delegitimized by scholarly criticisms; if it ever is, it will be by politics itself. Responding to the call for authentic debates and appropriate inclusive forums for such debates to take place requires carefully considering why, how and when a given public involvement mechanism is relevant and legitimate. Yet, it also requires being genuinely interested in civic life itself; citizenship is exercised everyday, with or without the determined help of public involvement scholars and practitioners. Perhaps like the writing of papers that do not proceed from the simple execution of a pre-determined research proposal, public involvement is an important journey to pursue and, yes, to believe in.

**References**


Martin, G. P. Citizens, publics, others and their role in participatory processes: a commentary on Lehoux et al. *Social Science & Medicine, in this issue.*


