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THESIS SUMMARY

Citizen participation:
Bargaining over boundaries
in the organization
of care services

Hailed as a way to grant citizens more control over the services they may use, advocates often portray citizen participation as a crucial ingredient for service improvement. At the same time, and despite widespread support for participation as a policy imperative, its pursuit often proves contentious. Critics consider participatory efforts to be something of a Trojan horse, noting that they are often used to legitimize decisions that have already been made or compensate for cutbacks in public spending. In this doctoral thesis, I investigate how these disparate accounts of citizen participation—and the organizational practices associated with them—interact within concrete participatory efforts. How do participatory initiatives evolve as people bargain over participation's parameters?

Empirically, my study examines the micro-processes in which employees of professional long-term care organizations in the Netherlands deal with their organizations' policy ambition, together with their colleagues and participating citizens, to create more space for citizen participation. In doing so, I deliberately move away from clear-cut normative definitions of what participation is or should be. Instead, I investigate participation as an emergent and contentious organizational phenomenon. By zooming in on how employees and citizens translate abstract policy ambitions into concrete participatory practices, I explore how they reconcile competing notions of 'appropriate' participation. At the same time, I also zoom out to show how such practices interact with actors' interests, normative dispositions and various positions of power in order to reveal participation's deep embeddedness within other organizational dynamics.

By studying how participation pursuits challenge actors' established relationships and positions within the governance and delivery of care services, my thesis sets out to answer the following research question:

How do actors (re)define insider-outsider relations as they negotiate the emergence, parameters and significance of alleged-outsiders' participation within an organizational setting?

As a theoretical foundation for my inquiries, I approach participatory efforts as instances of boundary work, i.e., by focusing on the inclusionary and exclusionary actions people use to open up or narrow down the space available for participation. From this perspective, I study how people negotiate which issues fall within or beyond the realm of participation, which actors are considered insiders or outsiders to a given organizational setting and the extent to which participation effectively impacts work practices across an organization's hierarchy and across positions of authority. I investigate such boundary processes up close, relying on ethnographic methods that allow me to follow how participation is gradually redefined among a range of actors and on various organizational platforms. In addition to observing how actors negotiate their relationships and mutual involvement in newly erected platforms for participation, I study how such 'front-line' developments both reflect and affect the dynamics of 'internal' organizational politics among a broader range of employees. In short, by untangling the sequences of boundary work observed on multiple organizational platforms, I am able to investigate the processual, dispersed and political dynamics of how actors bargain over participation's concrete parameters and implications.

My key findings can be structured along the three areas in which people delimit and negotiate the scope and impact of citizen participation: issues, actors and authority. To begin with, when pursuing participation, people quarrel over (1) which issues are considered pertinent to such participation. As such, I show how organizational actors face an inherently diverse set of perspectives regarding the 'appropriate' scope for participation. By politicizing such competing accounts, these actors may attempt to challenge the dominant approach to participation, which in turn results in the opening up or narrowing down of the range of issues open to participants' scrutiny. Alternatively, by depoliticizing alternative perspectives—i.e., by portraying them as 'the other side of the same coin'—these same actors may instead try to neutralize other actors' attempts to challenge the status quo. Importantly, actors also negotiate over (2) who is considered a legitimate participant. Accordingly, my analysis highlights the tenacious propensity to establish 'constructive collaboration' as the appropriate form of participation, which results in the 'legitimate' marginalization of critics who fail to adhere to this norm. Furthermore, as my research shows that actors also bargain over (3) the impacts of citizen participation on work practices

across the organizational hierarchy, I illuminate the paradoxical role of internal hierarchical support in realizing meaningful cross-boundary engagement: 'top-down' management involvement (or a lack thereof) can either make or break the significance of participatory initiatives. In sum, only when we engage in a power-sensitive analysis of these three interconnected areas of contestation are we able to demonstrate how participatory initiatives may or may not reconfigure the relationships and power dynamics found between the actors involved in organizing care—or between actors in other fields in which the participation of alleged outsiders is pursued. These analyses help us untangle the ways, both intended and unintended, in which such initiatives unfold and how they contribute to participants' emancipation within the organizational order or, alternatively, how they legitimize decisions that have already been made or transfer responsibilities to those who choose to participate.

Cutting across these different findings, my research highlights how important it is for scholars, policy makers and practitioners to not merely treat participation as a matter of organizational design or as a 'technical' solution to governance or organizational challenges, but instead to foster an awareness of the uncertain and contested nature of its translation into everyday organizational practices—even when its ambitions are supported by a broad range of actors and its intent is to 'democratize' service governance. Because their efforts inherently entail the inclusion of some actors and the exclusion of others, and because participants' status as an insider in one setting (e.g., on designated platforms for participation) may not be recognized in other settings (e.g., within decision-making processes), processes of participation are intrinsically messy. Moreover, given that the impact of participation is, to a large extent, negotiated outside the arenas designated for such engagement, participation advocates should not only expect to have to 'play' on multiple 'chessboards' at the same time, they should also make concerted efforts to engage with actors who may not be natural proponents of citizen participation. By calling into question who and what 'matters' within an organization, participatory efforts are by no means apolitical. Understanding participation and its consequences, therefore, requires a sensitivity to the emergent, contentious and often-messy micro-dynamics through which participatory processes evolve.

On a theoretical level, my boundary-work approach draws attention

to the delimited and often-contested scope of allegedly egalitarian pursuits of cross-boundary engagement, including their (possible lack of) significance to the organizational processes their advocates set out to influence. By highlighting the intricate and often-unanticipated boundary-work dynamics that unfold over time and across multiple sites, my study helps show how attempts at non-hierarchical, post-bureaucratic organizing in no way result in 'boundarylessness' or in the effacement of hierarchical order. In fact, and paradoxically, inclusionary efforts tend to evoke exclusionary effects (and vice versa) as actors contest 'appropriate' insider-outsider relations. By untangling the kaleidoscopic to and fro of boundary effacement and boundary erection, my study sheds light on the power dynamics that continue to shape people's attempts to 'transcend' organizational boundaries—even when those attempts explicitly try to move beyond established organizational hierarchies.