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Verloo, N.

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Captured by bureaucracy: street-level professionals mediating past, present and future knowledge

Nanke Verloo

Introduction

This chapter explores the role of 'street-level professionals' in planning, a peculiar expertise that emerges in response to the decreasing legitimacy and efficacy of public action in urban governance processes. In particular, I look at the street-level professional in order to question the uneven tension between bureaucratic and tacit knowledge in contemporary participatory processes. I show how initiatives that attempt to mediate between governmental and local community ambitions are today trapped in existing bureaucratic structures (Scott, 1998).

Lipsky's classic study of street-level bureaucrats (1980) reveals how frontline workers are embedded in the logic of bureaucracy on the one hand and the messy reality of the street-level on the other. Street-level workers are required to translate the rational norms of bureaucracy – which are guided by accountability, quotas and transparency – to the norms and practices of everyday life at the street-level – where they need experience, tacit knowledge and improvisation. In Lipsky's work, street-level bureaucrats are typically teachers, police officers, social workers and court officials (Lipsky, 1980: 3). In this chapter, building on the seminal work by Lipsky, I look at policymakers and planners who have the responsibility to organise a deliberative or participatory process as street-level professionals, those mediators who are today filling the widening gap between retrenched public governments and civic society. I use the term 'professional' to include the growing body of experts who, because of a growing demand for participatory planning, are in the unique position to bridge plans of the local government with plans of the community.

I argue that planners are in a unique position to develop an expertise for such street-level mediation. However, existing institutions tend

to 'capture' that mediation through norms that require organising, reducing and abstracting the complex knowledge of the community. This entrapping capacity of institutions is, as I argue, a distinctive logic of today's technocratic planning. I will use an interpretative approach (Yanow, 2000; 2007) to analyse several 'critical moments' that shaped one particular planning process in Amsterdam. These challenging moments provide a lens into three ways in which the deliberative process was 'captured by bureaucracy': first, by excluding informal stories from the institutional memory; second, by a top-down problem definition; and third, by the changing meaning of the decision mandate. In response to these moments of capture, street-level professionals used their discretionary space to develop skills to translate past, present and future knowledge.

Challenges of the deliberative professional

The challenge of working at the street-level

Planners and policymakers can be understood as 'street-level democrats' because their 'work involves – day by day – practical challenges of democratic responsiveness in realms such as community development, youth work, school administration, and urban planning' (Laws and Forester, 2015: 12). They have to implement participatory policies, as well as determine who is to take part in the deliberation and how that process should unfold. Since Lipsky's account of street-level bureaucrats, however, local governments have changed. Urban developments have become complex multi-stakeholder processes in which diverse types of knowledge have to be mediated and folded into decision-making. This gives public professionals such as planners, policymakers and welfare workers a central position in the negotiation between accountability and the use of discretionary space, between the government and its citizens, and between technocratic knowledge and everyday tacit knowledge.

Street-level democrats have substantial discretion in the execution of their work. Their practice shapes the meaning of policy in two ways: first, they choose how to implement policies and plans and thus shape citizens' experiences of policymaking and planning; and second, they determine the eligibility of citizens for government benefits as well as involvement in participatory processes. Street-level bureaucrats thus 'implicitly mediate aspects of the constitutional relationship of citizens to the state' (Lipsky, 1980: 4). That discretion, however, is not always positive. A general concern is that street-level professionals

use their influence over policy implementation to serve their own interests (Hogwood and Gunn, 1984). At best, street-level influence contributes to the use of state resources to respond to community and individual needs, but at worst, it displaces service goals with self-interest (Maynard-Moody et al, 1990: 833). Street-level professionals and the administrations for which they work thus constantly have to balance these two sides of the same coin. Researchers, however, argue that despite its inconsistency with the bureaucratic ideal of hierarchical control and rationality, 'delegating authority and including the perspective of street-level workers in programmatic decisions is one realistic alternative to managerial control when the objective is to reduce the dangers of discretion' (Maynard-Moody et al, 1990: 844). The double role of street-level professionals can thus be viewed as problematic, but it also provides an opportunity to improve policy programmes, plans and the relationship between the state and its citizens.

The challenge of mediating knowledge

The role of planners as street-level democrats requires an ability to mediate knowledge. In a deliberative process, street-level professionals are placed in a position to translate technocratic or expert knowledge from bureaucracy to the local – often considered mundane – yet expert knowledge of citizens (Durose, 2009). That position is hardly new; Lasswell was calling for a functionality that moved beyond expertise to incorporate mediation as early as 1941: 'The task of the emerging scientific policy professional – the urban planner, policy analyst, health or environmental specialist, etc. – would not be just to provide technical information for problem-solving, but also to combine it with a new function of facilitating public deliberation and learning' (Lasswell in Fischer, 2004: 21).

In recent decades, however, Lasswell's ideal has turned into a type of planner who presents the opinions of the public to elite decision-makers (Merelman in Fischer, 2004: 21) and not the other way around. In that role, the public professionals merely function as the only experts who have the technical expertise to intervene.

Growing uncertainty and reliability on expertise has reinforced the importance of expert knowledge and has simultaneously diminished the ability of laypeople to contribute their knowledge to decision-making processes (Callon, 1999). This 'quasi guardianship of autonomous experts' (Dahl, 2000) makes it difficult to hold public professionals accountable to the public – a process that makes the gap between

policy professionals and ordinary citizens bigger instead of smaller (Beck, 1992).

Planning theory has provided several responses that seek to bridge this gap between expert and lay knowledge. Of paramount importance is the approach to engage laypeople in the deliberative processes. Since the argumentative turn (Fischer and Forester, 1993), several approaches have been developed to emphasise the quality of dialogue and engage a variety of stakeholders in the deliberative process. Healey's work on collaborative planning (1997) proposes the organisation of the planning process as a collaboration between stakeholders. In these processes, planners take a role in mediating planning and policy disputes (Susskind and Ozawa, 1984).

In the deliberative approach, power is located not only in institutional spheres or particular social spheres, but rather it is distributed throughout the entire realm of human action (Innes and Booher, 2015: 199). To translate knowledge means not only that street-level professionals work with citizens in a way that enables them to make intelligent political judgements, but also that they inform their institutions with more tacit and informal knowledge from the street level. Professionals do not render judgement, but instead function as mediators between the bureaucracy and the world of citizens. Mediating between different types of knowledge is thus a key skill for successful street-level democrats.

The challenge of capture

With the term 'capture', I seek to address a particular and often unintended institutional reality. The term capture marks a moment when professionals are challenged to innovate their way of working, but are pulled back by the bureaucratic reality of institution. Institutions use bureaucratic norms that shape the routines and practices of street-level democrats, which can in turn be used to maintain the status quo. On the other hand, street-level democrats have discretionary space that provides them with space for improvisation (Lipsky, 1980). The innovation of practice routines takes shape in between these two institutional realities.

The concept emerged from observations that David Laws and I made during four years of training sessions with local professionals. We observed how local institutions stimulated their employees to innovate the deliberative process, but got 'stuck' because of institutional norms and technocratic conditions. Local professionals got 'stuck' when they tried to innovate their work and use a participatory way. They were

supported by their organisation, but often found themselves facing the same problems which they had faced before. David and I started to use the term 'capture' in relation to these challenges. Institutional norms may capture professionals unintentionally, while also instrumentally using bureaucracy to capture professionals and pull them back into the status quo.

Studying moments of capture empirically, as critical moments (Verloo, 2018b) in a process of deliberation, is helpful to understanding how practitioners build capacity for dealing with such moments. Laws and Forester (2015) used a similar approach to show how the relationship between expertise knowledge and context-related knowledge should always be diagnosed in action. 'Those working in the immediacy of local situations, in the specific settings of such cases, need to diagnose the context at hand and the problem at hand together in order to design actions that draw on the features of the case to address concerns for respect, for fairness, for democracy' (Laws and Forester, 2015: 348). Dealing with capture thus requires the ability to mediate expert knowledge and street-level knowledge. In the next section, I analyse how that mediation takes shape in a deliberative process.

As in any process, the past, present and future also shape and affect deliberative processes. The past is important because it sets the significance of a process. Memories of experiences in the past – like an attempt to participate in a planning process, or the memory of a fight with neighbours – shape people's willingness, expectations and therefore behaviour in planning processes. The present is often the source of disputes around value: what kind of knowledge is validated to shape and inform decision-making? Yet engaging stakeholders in the process itself could also validate the process for all stakeholders. The future sets an intention about the goals of a process – what kind of neighbourhood, public space, or community should be created? One could understand the past, the present and the future as types of knowledge that shape the decision-making process. In the following sections, I look into 'critical moments' (Verloo, 2018a; 2018b) that reveal how street-level professionals mediated between past, present and future knowledge within a planning process.

Mediating knowledge: a case study¹

The case study took place in Amsterdam between 2011 and 2015. At the time, the attempt to become a so-called 'participation society'

was high on the political agenda at all levels of Dutch political institutions (Hurenkamp et al, 2012). The Council of Amsterdam East wanted to facilitate a participatory planning process for a recreational facility on Java Island in Amsterdam. In 2011, a group of local citizens came together and requested that the local government facilitate the construction of a neighbourhood playground. At the time, the municipality of Amsterdam was decentralised and comprised several local districts that each had a broad mandate to make decisions and plan public spaces. Roos was a so-called 'participation broker' at the local district council – her job was to organise the process and contact the neighbours about a possible playground. The aforementioned request by the constituents of the Amsterdam East district concerned the plan for a 'playboat' – a public boat that would be placed at the quay of the island and on which a playground would be built.

Roos' first step was to find out about the wishes of the residents of the area. Very few people responded to her attempts, which meant to the professionals that the playboat enjoyed the support of many of the area's residents. In April 2012 a local politician made a promise on the local news that 'they would start planning and building the playboat soon' (Sophie, area manager housing cooperation, June 2015). Interestingly, nothing happened until February 2013, when the municipality decided to buy a boat that could function as a playboat. Then, again nothing happened until June 2014, when the municipality decided to send a letter to the residents of the Veemkade – the quay at which they planned to permanently dock the playboat – to inform them about the boat. That letter caused a pandemonium that the local policymakers had not expected. Many citizens were surprised about the decision and were very much against a playboat right in front of their houses. This was a big surprise to Roos: 'The local government expected that the project had much support and now it suddenly turned out to have none! We did intend to have a dialogue with the neighbourhood as a whole. So we decided to organise a meeting with residents' (Roos, participation broker municipality district East, May 2015).

Roos and her team had to deal with the many angry responses to the letter. Furthermore, they did not send an invitation to people living on the other side of the quay – the Javakade. This area was considered outside the 'participatory area'. The people living there had a memory of failed attempts to prevent the plan for a playground in their inner garden called the Tosari garden, and it was that memory that shaped the critical moment that made the whole project fall apart.

Capturing the mediation of past knowledge

The people of the Javakade had been in a conflict with the municipality over the Tosari garden. The Tosari garden was a green inner garden surrounded by apartment buildings in which the local government had previously placed a sliding slope. When the garden was renovated in 2011, the local council wanted to add additional playground equipment, but the people living around the garden were against this decision. Nevertheless, a swing was added. Residents of the Tosari garden tried to resist that decision and organised themselves in a variety of ways; the municipality, however, did not listen.

Four years later, that same group found that they were not invited to the public meeting about the playboat. These citizens mark the memory of the Tosari garden as a loss of trust in the local government and their intent to facilitate 'real' participation. Roos' team of street-level professionals did not know about the memory of the Tosari garden. She and her team only began working at the local district after the discussion about the Tosari garden was over. When arriving at the public meeting in November 2014, Roos and her team were surprised to find that the people from the Javakade were present. When the meeting started, they were even more surprised by the story they were told. The residents of the Javakade were well prepared and able to use their tacit and local memory of the Tosari garden to determine the discussion about the playboat: 'What I remember vividly is the incredible anger and lack of trust. It seemed a moment to discharge all distrust and astonishment about the way the municipality treated us in the past. I also said things that were very angry and emotional' (Linda, resident of Javakade, April 2015).

The institutional body of the local council lacked a structure to pass on the kind of narrative knowledge from the past to new colleagues working in the present. This local memory turned out to be a salient piece of information for professionals working with citizens. Especially when 'things are at stake' – during meetings where citizens and professionals negotiate about future plans – narrative knowledge from the street-level can provide a capacity to bridge differences. Creating a story that includes the memories and emotions of diverse stakeholders is itself creating a community (Verloo, 2015). An inclusive story underlines the meaning of interdependency among the stakeholders. 'Where the task is typically defined to mean that citizens need to learn more about the professional's mode of reasoning, we come to see that the expert also has to learn more about the practical modes of reason that inform the citizen's world' (Fischer, 2004: 24).

In Amsterdam East, the street-level professional's ability to immerse herself in the practical modes of reason that inform the world of citizens proves to be crucial. Stories are a specific form of institutional memory that are usually shared among people in informal interactions. For example, stories spread easily in the corridor or around the coffee machine. They involve a kind of reasoning that is often understood as informal, ideographic and symbolic. Technocratic as well as democratic institutions are focused on reasoning that is formal, representative of the public good and accountable. From that perspective, stories and memories of what has happened in one community are placed outside the kind of knowledge that the institution uses to inform professionals working in another community. In Amsterdam, however, it was exactly that kind of knowledge that captured Roos and her team and created an obstacle for developing a deliberative process. Narrative knowledge is critical information for street-level professionals mediating between bureaucracy and citizens.

Street-level professionals are in a unique position to translate lessons from historical cases to deliberative processes in the present. However, that capacity cannot be utilised if narrative knowledge is bound to ideographic memories of individuals working for the organisation and does not find a place in the institutional collective memory. The narrative knowledge about the Tosari garden could have enabled street-level professionals to acknowledge the earlier attempts of citizens to actively participate in decision-making at the very beginning of the process. Such acknowledgement would have deepened the recognition of interdependency among the local institutions and citizens. At the same time, it would have discursively communicated the intention to take citizens seriously. The lack of acknowledging this specific history inadvertently communicated what Arnstein called tokenism (Arnstein, 1969) – pretending participation but acting with authority.

Capturing the mediation of present knowledge

Not long after the meeting in November 2014, the playboat plans were cancelled. The local council, which had changed after local elections, decided that there was not enough support from the community. Nevertheless, the assignment to design more playgrounds remained on the agenda. In January 2015, the local council decided to redesign the western corner of Java Island (de Kop van Java) and place a large playground on the open site. The local council strategically involved the team of Roos and the other professionals who were now informed about the memory of the Tosari garden and had a chance to build a

network within the community. They faced the challenge of rebuilding trust with the community. Their strategy was to start with a public workshop to which everyone in the neighbourhood was invited and which would facilitate a dialogue about the plans for a playground.

The workshop was not fully open to deliberation, however. The problem was already defined – there was a need for a playground – and the site where the playground was to be built was no longer up for debate; a playground would be constructed on the Kop van Java. In preparation, the local council had prepared two designs: civil servants of the local council made one design and the citizens' organisation 'the Javaarde' prepared a second. The workshop would allow citizens to reflect on the designs and to prepare them for an 'e-voting' – an internet referendum about the two plans – that would take place a few months later.

Henk was the moderator for the public meeting that took place in the local school. He, Roos and others on the policymaking team prepared the workshop in several rounds in which citizens would talk to each other and professionals from the local district. The room was set up like a workshop environment; there was no stage, and citizens could place themselves around tables on which drawings of each design were placed. Local politician Thijs wanted to be transparent and started the meeting by explaining what was already decided and what was still open for deliberation. He did not question the decision for a playground itself, which led to a reaction from a neighbour who criticised, 'When did you decide that the site should become a playground? Who made that decision and why?' (Citizen at public meeting, May 2015).

At that moment, Henk did something that, upon reflection, others later considered very useful. Instead of looking to the politician for an answer, Henk turned to the audience and to the collective memory of the community for an answer. He asked, 'Who has an answer to this question?' At that moment, the representative of the Javaarde was able to explain the support for the process. Local professionals later revealed that this was a critical moment because it turned over ownership of the process. The district council was not the only party claiming ownership – the citizens' organisation did as well. On the other hand, citizens later referred to this moment as a way to steer the discussion away from a new conflict.

Despite rising tensions, the meeting went on to a second round, which allowed citizens to discuss ideas for the Kop van Java. During these sessions, one group came up with a whole new plan which included a playground, but which also left more space for dog-walking – a general concern among citizens. At that moment, Henk

was challenged to choose between the initial agenda of the meeting or to allow this shift in plans. He intuitively chose the latter and asked the citizens to inform the rest of the people about this new third plan. The responses to the third design were very positive.

Henk reveals an interesting capacity to translate present knowledge. He commits to representing the knowledge of citizens and decides that this third design should also be included in the plans for the e-voting. He mediates present knowledge in three ways. First, he mediates between the politician who represents a top-down decision and citizens who represent support for that decision. Second, he mediates between the existing information that is communicated through the existing designs and the new information that comes in through the work of citizens at the meeting. He allows both types of information to shape the outcome of the meeting. Third, he mediates between what is expected about the continuing process, that is, an e-voting about two plans, with an unexpected shift in that process – an e-voting about three plans.

As a mediator Henk, has to make these decisions in a split second and in the challenging context of a meeting where many things are at stake. Henk explained later that building trust was on the top of his mind throughout the whole meeting. It was trust that informed his choices. His working theory of trust was to work on collective ownership. He used a fascinating practice to develop that trust: 'I used the technique of giving back what people say. So repeating their words so that they know and feel that I listen to them' (Henk during reflection session, July 2015).

The public meeting reveals how the institutional process of decision-making captures the discretionary space of the mediator because many decisions were already made beforehand. There was no room to negotiate about the problem-definition itself. Fischer argued that it is typically 'the implicit or hidden normative assumptions of expert advice that concern the citizens, not the technical per se' (Fischer, 2004: 24). Citizens seek to deliberate about what makes a good city or neighbourhood, and these ideas and assumptions lie underneath the surface of what planning experts call rational planning and thus lie underneath any decision-making process. If citizens are not engaged in the problem definition that lies underneath a plan, one could question the meaning of deliberation in the first place.

Nevertheless, the mediator was able to gain some discretionary space by translating the present knowledge that was available in the room in two ways. He first steered the conversation to acknowledging collective ownership. Second, he allowed the inclusion of a future imaginary of

citizens that was not on the agenda. He thereby mediated the dispute over values that are at stake in public meetings.

Capture the mediation of future knowledge

The decision to include the third design in the e-voting had direct effects on the rest of the planning process. The third design had to be recalculated and checked by planners of the municipality, and it also had to be translated into a design that could be executed. The planner's reason for taking on the extra work was very pragmatic: 'we did not want to ignore the new plan and lose all the goodwill that we created in the meeting' (Mark, project leader municipality, July 2015).

The e-voting took place in the summer of 2015, with 292 citizens voting, of which an 89 per cent majority selected the third design that came out of the meeting. That clear outcome caused a new dilemma for the street-level professionals; they proved to be able to translate the street-level knowledge of citizens into a future plan for the public space, but were they also able to translate that plan to the political agenda of elected officials?

The representative democracy model is organised in a way that places the mandate for the final decision in the hands of elected officials – the local district council. Although they had approved of a deliberative process that engaged citizens, it was unclear whether they would also have approved of the third design that was now convincingly representing the future imaginary of citizens. A deliberative process among public professionals and citizens thus changes the role of elected officials. In effect, the meaning of their mandate changes. A participatory process shapes a promise that the outcome of the process will be the outcome of the political decision. Power is no longer only located in the institutional sphere, but distributed throughout the entire process (Innes and Booher, 2015: 199). The political mandate becomes less important than the decision-making process itself. Furthermore, the role of the street-level professionals becomes more important, because they are in a position to make that process as legitimate as possible, so that the council does not have another choice but to follow the advice of citizens. If the local council does not follow the outcome of a deliberative process, the council would capture the entire process.

Elected official Thijs was engaged in the process from the start. This allowed him to play a role in mediating between the future imaginary of citizens and the political imaginary of the council. His engagement and close ties to Roos' team provided him with information about the design, but – what is more important – with knowledge about

the process that would underline the legitimacy of the third design to the rest of the council. In his speech during the council meeting, he emphasised that process. The local council decided to follow the outcome of the e-voting. In September 2015, preparations were made for the execution of the plan.

Conclusions

In this chapter we looked into the practice of street-level professionals, a profile of expertise that emerged in the empty space left by the shrinking public bureaucracies and an increasingly active civic society. In a deliberative decision-making process, street-level professionals play a crucial role in mediating between the logics of bureaucracy and the world of citizens. The ability to mediate knowledge is a critical capacity in such a process. An interpretative approach was taken to analyse the critical moments in a case study in the east part of Amsterdam. Critical moments provide an insight into the way stakeholders negotiate about meaning and relationships in a process. By examining the details of interaction during several critical moments in eastern Amsterdam, we started to see how street-level professionals tried to mediate knowledge, but also where they were captured by bureaucracy. Street-level professionals have to mediate between memories of the past, roles in the present and imaginaries of the future, and all three will determine how successful a deliberative can be.

What did we learn from this account? First of all, we learned that the ability to mediate past knowledge is highly dependent on personal experience. This means that when expertise moves beyond the codified boundaries of protocols and standardised procedures, the role of individual experts becomes more crucial, leaving more space for individual sensitivity and arbitrariness. Since Roos was new and her institution had no structure to pass on narrative knowledge of local memories, her attempt at citizen participation was captured before it had even started. The past conveys significance. In practice, that meant that the gap in Roos' knowledge created a situation in which she could not assess how significant the memory of the Tosari garden was to citizens. She was therefore limited in her ability to translate past knowledge to the present during the public meeting about the playboat.

Second, we learned that engaging citizens by engaging their tacit knowledge in the present – during a public meeting – does not compensate for citizens' engagement in the problem definition and design of the process itself. The power of bureaucracy became

prominent when the audience asked to be fully included in the definition of the problem at stake. Because the present conveys value, the eventual success of the workshop depended on the capability of the moderator, who was able both to mediate the dispute of values by building collective ownership and to include local knowledge by including a third and unexpected plan. Engaging local knowledge, however, did not shift power relations between the government and citizens to a more interdependent process. Elected officials were in control of all three aspects of the decision-making process: the problem definition at the start; the process of e-voting; and the final decision about the outcome.

Third, the success of the whole process was dependent upon the mediating capacity of one particular street-level professional. The centrality of autonomous experts is perhaps the most distinctive characteristic of the working of street-level professionals. It symptomises a progressive individualisation and fragmentation of public governments that leave room for all kinds of ad-hoc professional profiles and forms of knowledge. Roos and her team, Henk the moderator and Thijs the local official, committed themselves to developing and representing the future imaginary of citizens throughout the process, thus conveying intention. Where the lack of past knowledge captured the first part of the process, the commitment to including present knowledge and the future imaginary of citizens provided the street-level professionals with the capacity to resist possible moments of capture. Thijs' commitment to the process allowed the council to follow the outcome of the e-voting. The relative autonomy of the moderator certainly allowed being responsive to the need of this particular process. However, the rising reliance on individual professionalism inevitably flags up the question of accountability, particularism and favouritism. This particular case shows that the ability to translate past, present and future knowledge may shape a successful deliberative process. But at the same time, the existing bureaucracy still plays an overarching role in determining which knowledge is understood as appropriate, which citizen groups should be engaged, which decisions are made in advance, and what mandate the outcome of a process has. The success of a deliberative process becomes therefore dependent largely upon the capacity of street-level professionals to use their discretionary space and to predict how these bureaucratic norms might capture the process. In order to function as mediators, street-level professionals are in need of an active commitment of elected officials to include tacit knowledge of citizens and a mandate to manage moments in which they may become captured by bureaucracy.

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Note

- ¹ This case study is based on an earlier policy briefing for the municipality of Amsterdam (Verloo et al, 2015).