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The advent of the citizen expert. Democratizing or pushing the boundaries of expertise?

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Abstract

This contribution introduces Current Sociology's special subsection 'The advent of the citizen expert. Democratizing or pushing the boundaries of expertise?', which deals with the increasing involvement of 'ordinary citizens' as experts into political and social debates. From an integrated perspective that transcends policy fields and societal realms, the special subsection deals with the epistemic and democratic implications of this transformation in civic participation and knowledge validation practice and pays special attention to the tensions that the 'double promise' associated with citizen expertise can imply. Three promising themes and research avenues are identified that the advent of the citizen expert highlights: The changes in liberal-democratic culture indicated by the emergence of this new actor category, the way societal power relations are impacted by the elevation of citizen expertise and the subsequently shifting boundaries and standards of what can count as knowledge or expertise.

Citizen expertise today

Initiatives that attribute an expert status to 'ordinary citizens' multiply in modern societies. Across policy-fields and societal sectors, the involvement of average people as 'experts-by-experience', 'citizen scientists', 'local', 'lay', 'community' or 'citizen experts' has become so commonplace that it is the lack of such participatory mechanisms that now needs to be justified (Barnes and Cotterell 2012, xviii; Demszky and Nassehi 2012). In public services, service users' knowledge is now customarily drawn upon both to develop services and to 'empower' those involved (Meriluoto 2018). In environmental governance, citizens' observations about their environment are increasingly pooled to gather large datasets for citizen science-based research and policy-making (Pocock et al. 2017).

Across the broad range of initiatives that build on citizen expertise, their potential merits seem to be easy to articulate, while possible downsides and dilemmas are not as visible: They are pitted as an answer to the public disenchantment with long-established channels of participation (such as political parties and elections) and to public calls for opening up science and policy-making to wider circles of society (Jones, Jallinoja and Pietilä 2021; Pallett 2020). They provide opportunities to tap into idle knowledge resources and produce efficient solutions that are close to the affected people's problems (Rabeharisoa, Moreira and Akrich 2014; Lancaster et al. 2017). The involvement of citizen experts thus seems to offer cures for the crisis of representative democracy and the growing public distrust in traditional elites and experts at the same time.

Current research on citizen expertise is abundant but scattered in a range of fields that each take their own, disciplinary perspective on the phenomenon. They focus on different societal realms, most importantly urban planning and governance, the social, and in particular, the health sector as well as the field of nature conservation, environmental policy and sustainable development (see for examples of the 'classic' case-based studies by Epstein (1996), Fischer (2000) and Wynne (1996), and for interesting recent studies Blume (2017), Kasperowski and Hilman (2018) and Sprain and Reinig (2017). These studies have significantly opened up lay and citizen expertise practices within *specific* policy-fields and societal sectors. Many contributions have

investigated how knowledge production processes are transformed by the introduction of different ‘forms’ of knowledge (Collins and Evans 2007; Jasanoff 2005) and how policy-making is affected by the growing emphasis on ‘evidence-based policy’ (Stewart et al. 2020; Jung, Korinek and Straßheim 2014). However, the democratic implications of these altered knowledge-production processes and the ‘expertisation’ of participation has received much less academic attention (see, however Pallett 2020; Meriluoto 2021). Subsequently, a broader, sociological discussion on the implications of citizen expertise across fields is long overdue.

Our integrated view – the double promise of citizen expertise

The rationale of this special subsection is to go beyond and interconnect field-specific perspectives and to attend to the normative implications of the societal shift that “the advent of the citizen expert” represents.

We look at different forms of citizen expertise from an integrated perspective that transgresses academic disciplines, societal realms and policy fields and focuses on the shared features of the various empirical manifestations. This perspective sheds light on the citizen expert as a social phenomenon whose advent tells us something about shifting social norms, political culture and practices. What kind of transformations, not just for policy-making but for democracies as cultures and ways of thinking, take place as we are involving citizens *as experts* into public sense- and decision-making? What are the origins of such configurations and how do they affect the roles of citizens and experts? What are the democratic legitimacy implications when public participation is being ‘expertised’?

This special subsection also spotlights the *double promise* that lay or citizen experts radiate: to tap into *new channels of participation* that potentially engage even marginalised and hard-to-reach groups of society, and the promise to harness so far unused, and particularly *authentic knowledge resources* and the experience-based, non-certified expertise of the people ‘on-the-ground’. This double promise is present in all the subfields that engage with the topic and the very concept of ‘citizen expertise’ is meant to convey it.

While existing studies usually *either* approach the topic as a participatory mechanism from a democratic perspective, *or* as a question of knowledge production, validity and expert trustworthiness, we want to pay attention to both of these dimensions at the same time. From different perspectives, the articles explore the tensions that come to the fore when we co-consider the two sets of norms – democratic and epistemic – that can and often do draw into different directions. Krick’s contribution conceptualises citizen expertise, distinguishes different forms (service user involvement, citizen science, local knowledge and experience-based expertise) and discusses epistemic and democratic merits of citizen expertise. Pedersen and colleagues’ article on expert activists in Norwegian drug policy investigates how the tensional relationship between democratic and epistemic demands contribute to troublesome constructions of ‘legitimacy’. In their article on the construction of citizen experts in Finnish social policy and urban participatory projects, Meriluoto and Kuokkanen propose a framework for analysing the contradictory value-basis of citizen expertise.

Core themes and promising research angles

a) Shifts in liberal-democratic culture

The introduction of the new actor category of a citizen expert is embedded in, and reflective of significant, yet somewhat implicit changes in western liberal-democratic political cultures as regards the grounds of social inclusion and the most prominent avenues of generating legitimacy. The cultural repertoires drawn on when assembling and justifying the need for citizen expertise reflect what kind of political culture is being created in and through these new types of civic action, and how people's possibilities to take part socially is shaped in the process (e.g. Luhtakallio 2019; Lichterman & Eliasoph 2014). From a democratic perspective of self-determination and equality, it makes a difference whether social and political inclusion is based on a useful, knowledge-based contribution or on rights- and interests-based claims, and a preference for the 'ordinary citizen', the 'general public', and 'local communities' differs from participatory debates that emphasise organised groups and representation (Krick 2021; Martin 2008). When the expertise of citizens is emphasised as the key contribution, political action can be a much more individualised endeavour than the collective mobilisation of patient or neighbourhood organisations, and civic participation can be steered towards the realm of 'a-political' governance, instead of interest- and value-based debate.

b) The boundaries of expertise

The introduction of the concept of citizen expertise unavoidably challenges the notion of expertise in social and academic debate and accentuates alternative and non-credentialed forms of expertise (Collins and Evans 2007; Grundmann 2017). Conveying new premises for calling someone an expert forces a thorough exploration and justification of the assemblage of expertise in different contexts. The notion of citizen expertise stands for a new openness in knowledge production, but at the same time contests standards and boundaries of what can count as knowledge.

At this point, the reconciliation of different forms of expertise in social and political debates, as well as in academic inquiry, is far from given. In fact, the reshuffling of expertise comes with unavoidable social implications, ranging from the way in which the value of scientific inquiry is constructed into the different ways of positioning citizens and experts in decision-making. From a social-relational viewpoint on expertise, its validity depends on the recognition by others and where and whether social actors draw a dividing line between knowledge claims and any other form of input therefore makes a difference. A key question is how to retain the rigour and validity of credentialed knowledge, and of scientific inquiry in particular, while at the same time valuing new forms of 'anyone's knowledge'. How can the unique value of both knowledge forms be retained?

c) Power and inequalities

The shift towards the involvement of citizen experts impacts power relations between social actors. It challenges both the positions of an expert and of a lay citizen, potentially providing new ground to disassemble the hierarchical positions between the two and to re-examine the different roles and positions they assume. At the same time, the introduction of the concept enables creating new hierarchical positions, especially between civic actors. It can amplify some voices and stifle others, launch new knowledge hierarchies, bespeak epistemic injustices and reconfirm or even aggravate social inequalities. From a viewpoint of power and inequality,

it makes a non-trivial difference that citizen expertise practices likely elevate those that have access to usable knowledge and the resources to participate. Likewise, those sharing the language and culture of the powerful and those professional in their conveyance of knowledge claims are most likely to be acknowledged as equals by the ‘real experts’ and other social elites (Meriluoto 2018; Lancaster et al. 2017). Citizen expertise, then, should not be investigated as a prima facie ‘democratising’ phenomenon, but instead as a new component in our era of participatory democracies through which both the assembling and disassembling of power and privilege can take shape in novel ways.

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