10. Public encounters and the role of citizens' impression management

Lieke Oldenhof and Eline Linthorst

10.1 INTRODUCTION

Public encounters can be viewed as the communicative 'in-between' in which citizens and street-level bureaucrats define the situation in orientation towards each other (Bartels 2013, 2015). In defining the situation, policies about public services get real and achieve concrete forms (Goodsell 1981; Zacka 2017). Even though at first glance the interaction may seem highly unequal in terms of status and the ability of street-level bureaucrats to determine access to public services, citizens strategically create certain impressions of themselves, thereby redefining the situation (Soss 1999; Mik-Meyer and Villadsen 2013; Zacka 2017). Given new expectations about participatory decision-making and co-production of support in changing welfare states (Mik-Meyer and Villadsen 2013; Marston and Davidson 2020; see also Chapter 4 in this volume), this strategic influence of citizens is of increasing importance to study up close (Barnes and Prior 2009). In this chapter, we thus turn the gaze on citizens. By doing so, we aim to make a contribution to current street-level bureaucracy literature that primarily has focused on the role of street-level bureaucrats and how they perceive and react to citizens' demands.

We empirically examine how citizens conduct impression management during public encounters with street-level bureaucrats (Mik-Meyer and Villadsen 2013). In line with Goffman, we define impression management as the orchestration of a carefully designed presentation of one's self that will create a desired image that aligns with one's needs in social interaction (Goffman 1971 [1959]). An important underlying assumption of the concept of impression management is that citizens have agency to create and control the presentation of their self-image towards street-level bureaucrats (see also Soss 1999; Dubois 2017). It is nevertheless important to realize that citizen agency is not unlimited; it is embedded in policy ideals and institutional rules that set expectations about how public encounters should proceed and which roles are acceptable to play (Mik-Meyer and Villadsen 2013; Lee Koch 2018).

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When researching impression management, it is therefore necessary to analyse impression management in the context of institutional rules in changing welfare states.

In this chapter we specifically focus on institutional rules that reframe the purpose of public encounters from standardized eligibility assessments towards situated forms of co-production involving citizens and their social network in the design and delivery of support (Barnes and Prior 2009). By doing so, we can investigate how citizens experience changing role expectations: from citizens as bearers of legal entitlements to public services towards independent co-producers of support with the help of their social network. We focus on a Dutch case study of changing role expectations in social care. Given recent decentralizations of social care and support to local municipalities, changing role expectations of citizens and street-level bureaucrats in public encounters have been especially pertinent in the Netherlands compared to most other European countries.

The central research question we address in this chapter is: Given new institutional rules regarding public encounters, how does impression management by citizens play a role in the interaction between citizens and street-level bureaucrats? To answer this question, we will make use of a qualitative multi-method approach. We conducted ethnographic observations of public encounters in social care and support in the Dutch city of Rotterdam. In addition, we conducted interviews with citizens and citizen interest groups to investigate how they experienced public encounters and reflected upon their presentation of the self. Finally, we conducted a qualitative content analysis of Twitter messages by citizens commenting on how they experienced public encounters with street-level bureaucrats in the context of the Dutch Social Support Act (2015). This allowed us to supplement insights from the ethnographic data from Rotterdam within a broader policy context.

In the following sections, we first place the concept of impression management within Goffman's dramaturgical approach to interactions. We then describe the Dutch policy context of the social care domain and analyse how changing institutional rules increasingly frame public encounters as venues for co-production and shared decision-making, thereby creating new role expectations of citizens. Following this, we outline our multi-method approach and the results. We zoom in on how citizens rehearse their performance, set the stage in anticipation of the public encounter and conduct impression management while interacting face-to-face with street-level bureaucrats. The empirical analysis reveals frictions between street-level bureaucrats' attempts to promote self-reliance and co-production and citizens' attempts to create the impression of 'need' that justifies access to public services in times of austerity. Based on our findings, we reflect in the conclusion on the subtle power dynamics that are at play in public encounters from the lens of impression management.

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10.2 DRAMATURGICAL ANALYSIS OF CITIZENS' IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT

The concept of impression management was coined by the sociologist Erving Goffman, who developed a dramaturgical analysis of social interactions. In his book *The presentation of self in everyday life* (1971 [1959]), Goffman uses metaphors from theatre to show how people present themselves to others in a credible way. The person giving the impression is called the performer. In enacting a performance, performers switch between 'the frontstage' and 'the backstage'. In the frontstage they create an impression of the idealized self to an audience, whereas in 'the backstage' they can relax their social facade (Goffman 1971 [1959]; Næss, Fjær and Vabø 2016) or rehearse their performance before entering the frontstage. Access to the backstage is controlled in order to avoid the audience seeing forms of uncontrolled impressions that could contradict the impression created frontstage (Wehrens, Oldenhof and Bal 2022). In addition to frontstage and backstage dynamics, Goffman also analysed how people can 'lose face' when their frontstage performance is perceived as untrustworthy or incoherent by the audience. In those situations, people are likely to conduct 'facework' to regain face by counteractive incidents, i.e., 'events whose effective symbolic implications threaten face' (Goffman 1967: 12). Examples of facework are offering apologies or blame avoidance strategies like ignoring the other.

The concept of impression management has been applied by various scholars in widely different domains, such as health care (Lewin and Reeves 2011; Næss *et al.* 2016; Wehrens *et al.* 2022), network governance (Hajer and Versteegh 2005) and business (Shepherd and Haynie 2011). However, few studies can be found that discuss impression management in the context of public encounters (see notable exceptions Soss 1999; Smith 2011; Mik-Meyer 2017; Whelan 2021). The studies that do apply impression management in the context of public encounters offer some interesting insights on which this chapter can further build. First, citizens often create an image of a 'good' applicant that is cooperative, respectful and compliant in its encounters with street-level bureaucrats to ensure that street-level bureaucrats do not deny access to public assistance (Soss 1999; Whelan 2021) and find them 'deserving' of support (Loyens, Schott and Steen 2019). This public image of the 'good' client that complies can exist parallel to disguised partial non-compliance in practice (Whelan 2021). Because clients feel they cannot openly disagree with the conditions of support due to perceived power imbalances with street-level bureaucrats, they may decide to keep non-compliant behaviour under the radar. Second, citizens are also conscious of how street-level bureaucrats perceive their performance of the 'good' client role.

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They sometimes worry that they may come across as too self-reliant, thereby inadvertently giving off the impression of not needing support whereas in fact they do need it. Therefore, citizens sometimes tweak their self-presentation by avoiding looking too healthy or groomed (Soss 1999). Citizen support groups also provide advice to applicants about how to manage their physical appearance during public encounters: depending on the situation, this advice may differ between dressing up or down (Soss 1999). Third, the feeling of stigma often plays a role in impression management. Stigma can be experienced by negative associations evoked by the label of welfare applicant or physical/mental disabilities (Whelan 2021; see also Smith 2011). Citizens experiencing stigma often conduct impression management to avoid stigma, for example by not sharing certain information about their condition which they feel ashamed about (Whelan 2021). These forms of impression management may have negative consequences for citizens when street-level bureaucrats decide not to allocate support because citizens do not fully share all the information needed.

Although current studies on citizen impression management have provided useful insights into the dynamics of impression management, there is still little attention for how changing policy ideals and institutional rules regarding shared decision-making and co-production affect citizen impression management during public encounters. It is therefore unclear whether citizens may redefine their self-image in line with new policy ideals or whether they may feel the need to resist. To gain empirical insights, we focus on a Dutch case study of citizen impression management in the context of changing institutional rules about public encounters in the social care domain.

10.3 THE DUTCH CONTEXT: CHANGING INSTITUTIONAL RULES AND ROLE EXPECTATIONS IN PUBLIC ENCOUNTERS

In this chapter we focus on the Dutch policy context in the social care domain. In 2015, the national government decentralized responsibilities for youth care, social welfare and care for chronically ill and the elderly to the municipalities. The aim of the decentralizations was multiple: to bring support closer to people in order to provide tailored support, to increase participation and self-reliance of citizens in their own care process, as well as to save costs. We specifically focus on the implementation of the Dutch Social Support Act (2015) that provides support to people who can no longer participate in society due to mental or physical disabilities. Forms of support that are provided under this Act are domestic support, daytime activities, local transportation and home facilities such as stairlifts and other adjustments to the house.

An important consequence of the Dutch Social Support Act is that citizens no longer have a universal claim to support based on clear eligibility criteria

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and guidelines. Instead, municipalities only have the obligation to compensate citizens by support that fits the real needs and circumstances. What is needed and fitting is explored in dialogue between street-level bureaucrats and citizens. A wide range of solutions is conceivable: from informal care given by family members to making use of collective facilities such as neighbourhood community centres or individual public services. Only when needed support cannot be co-produced with the help of the citizen's social network does the municipality step in by allocating individual services.

This shift in institutional rules from abstract entitlements to tailored and co-produced solutions also affects the role expectations of citizens and street-level bureaucrats in public encounters. Rather than following strict guidelines to assess eligibility for support, street-level bureaucrats are now expected to engage in an open dialogue with citizens jointly exploring various possibilities, such as asking for help from family members, friends or neighbours. Citizens are expected to no longer 'claim' their rights, but to stay self-reliant as long as possible with the help of their social network. Moreover, they are expected to act as co-producers by thinking about solutions for their situation. This role of citizens as co-producers is especially evident in the recent policy of 'kitchen table conversations'. These conversations, which take place in the private home environment of citizens, are framed by policy-makers as open dialogues between citizens and street-level bureaucrats in which they jointly explore the current situation and assess what is needed. In addition to kitchen table conversations in the home environment, public encounters also take place at integrated support desks in municipal offices. This is especially the case when citizens first approach the government for help. Street-level bureaucrats working at these support desks are also expected to engage citizens in thinking about solutions and involving their social network in the co-production of support.

Although policy expectations about changing roles of citizens during public encounters are high, recent research shows that the adoption of new roles is controversial, given concerns about the instrumental use of co-production in times of budget cuts and the risk of overburdening clients and their informal care givers (Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau 2017; Bredewold, Duyvendak, Kampen, Tonkens and Verplanke 2018; Van Hees, Horstman, Jansen and Ruwaard 2020; Hupe and Steen 2022). It is therefore necessary to more fully investigate how citizens engage in impression management towards street-level bureaucrats during public encounters in the private home environment as well as public support desks to get a more on-the-ground understanding of their agency.

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10.4 RESEARCH DESIGN

Because impression management is conducted in interaction between citizens and street-level bureaucrats, ethnographic observations of public encounters form the core of the qualitative data set. The first author conducted ethnographic observations of public encounters (*n*=38 in total) in the city of Rotterdam in the period of February 2019–March 2020. By shadowing nine street-level bureaucrats in their daily work, the first author was able to observe how they interacted with citizens during public encounters. Street-level bureaucrats were informally interviewed about their expectations before the public encounter and how they had experienced the encounter afterwards. The public encounters took place in different settings: the private setting of citizens' homes or in the public setting of the municipal office desk. At the start of the public encounter, the first author asked permission to make fieldnotes and record conversations with an audio device. Both citizens and street-level bureaucrats were asked to sign an informed consent form. During the observations, the first author made fieldnotes of what was being said (the choice of words, use of jargon, conversation turns), how it was being said (tone of voice, use of emotions and body language), the setting of the public encounter (arrangements of chairs, lay-out of the room) and the use of objects (letters, medication strips, etc.). In addition, fieldnotes of the public encounters were further elaborated with information gathered from the informal interviews with street-level bureaucrats in between public encounters. The fieldnotes were supplemented by transcripts of the audio files, which allowed for a more in-depth analysis of the content of public encounters and informal interviews with street-level bureaucrats.

In addition to the observations, the first and second author conducted interviews with citizens who made a claim to the Dutch Social Support Act (*n*=2) and representatives of patient support groups (*n*=6). These interviews provided valuable additional insights into how citizens experience their own role during the public encounter and what the role of citizen support groups is in preparing citizens for their performance during the public encounter. Due to the emergence of Covid-19, it was difficult to contact more citizens for interviews. We tried to compensate for this by interviewing multiple representatives of citizen organizations that could provide an overview of the issues that citizens faced during public encounters. All the audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed for analysis.[1]

To place the insights from the ethnographic data from Rotterdam and interviews within a broader policy context, Twitter messages were collected that were posted by citizens commenting on how they experienced public encounters in the home environment with street-level bureaucrats in the

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context of the Dutch Social Support Act. This data search was performed by Christiaan d'Hondt, a Master's student at the Erasmus School of Health Policy and Management and supervised by the first author. The search terms selected for harvesting were: 'keukentafelgesprek' (kitchentable conversation), 'Keukentafel gesprek' (kitchen table conversation), 'Keukentafel WMO' (Kitchen Table Social Support Act) and 'keukentafelgesprek WMO' (Kitchentable Conversation Social Support Act). The raw data, consisting of 677 unique tweets and their comments, were subjected to two rounds of cleaning to prepare for analysis. The first round removed all content not identifiably related to health care through the contents of the output file, leaving 206 unique messages with comments. The second round of cleaning included the entirety of the tweet as seen on Twitter and removed all messages not directly referencing the kitchen table conversation in the original message or the attached comments. The final data set consisted of 90 unique tweets and their attached series of comments, dated from the implementation of the Dutch Social Support Act in 2015 up to the date of the harvesting, April 2020.

To analyse the observations, interviews and Twitter messages for common themes, we combined inductive and deductive coding. We first inductively coded the data for recurring themes. Examples of inductive codes were: the scripted nature of the conversation due to the use of guidelines by street-level bureaucrats, citizen reactions to questions asked by street-level bureaucrats and roles of citizens (citizens claiming rights versus self-reliant citizens). In addition, we deductively coded the data using the following sensitizing concepts derived from the literature: 'front- and backstage interaction', 'impression management citizen', 'credibility of impression management', 'losing face', 'facework'. By combining the inductive and deductive themes, we made a chronological ordering of impression management: the rehearsal of the performance backstage, the setting of the stage in anticipation of the public encounter and impression management during the public encounter. In this ordering, we describe impression management from the perspective of citizens because this perspective is under-researched in the street-level bureaucracy literature. We do, however, acknowledge that street-level bureaucrats also engage in impression management, although this is not the primary focus in this chapter.

10.5 RESULTS

Rehearsing the Performance Backstage and Setting the Stage

Even before meeting street-level bureaucrats face to face during public encounters, citizens already think about how the public encounter will proceed. Patient organizations emphasize that kitchen table conversations especially are

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often perceived as a 'black box'. Citizens often do not know what to expect: how will the conversation go? Does the professional sitting at the table have sufficient specialized expertise to properly diagnose the problem? Will there be a suitable solution? In order to strengthen their position, some citizens 'rehearse' their performance in advance with representatives or volunteers of patient support groups by conducting role plays: so-called 'trial' kitchen table conversations. During these role plays, volunteers provide advice to citizens about what to say and what not to say. For example, citizens are advised to put emphasis in their impression management on their (physical/mental) limitations rather than their abilities to make sure they are eligible for sufficient support. In addition, some patient support groups encourage citizens to engage in strategic behaviour, such as crying, although they also set limits to what behaviour is off bounds:

> *Dialogue session @ ZonMw Rotterdam (research funding body). Volunteer coaches people with a mental handicap how to do a kitchen table conversation: 'You are allowed to cry, but you cannot lie.' Brilliant.* (Twitter message, 24 May 2017)

In order to provide more insights into the black box of decision-making, patient organizations discuss policy guidelines and eligibility criteria. This is appreciated by citizens as they feel more in control of the conversation and able to influence the outcome. As becomes clear from these rehearsals, citizens do not view the public encounter as an open dialogue or co-production in which both parties can offer their views on what is needed, but as an assessment of their eligibility for public support.

In addition to rehearsing their performance in anticipation of the public encounter, citizens also 'prepare' the stage. This is especially the case when public encounters take place in the home environment. Citizens often prepare coffee or tea to make the street-level bureaucrat feel welcome or tidy up their house in advance:

> *Just wiped the kitchen table clean. Pulled my dress straight. Suppressing my nerves. I am up for it: in a minute I am having # a kitchentable conversation (# wishmeluck!)* (Twitter message, 31 May 2018)

Preparing the stage can also include the removal of certain objects to make sure that street-level bureaucrats cannot take this into account in their decision-making:

> *I just had a kitchen table conversation (Dutch Social Support Act, application for individual support ASS). I did remove the Christmas cards beforehand, otherwise it looks like I have a social network?* (Twitter message, 21 December 2017)

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Although generally citizens appreciate the fact that street-level bureaucrats make the effort to come to their place, sometimes citizens object to this. They experience the street-level bureaucrats' presence in their private environment as an institutional intrusion into their lifeworld and prefer to meet in a public office, thereby 'switching the stage' on which they need to perform. This can be viewed as an act of counter-agency that shows how citizens are able to reset the rules.

Compared to public encounters in the home environment, public encounters at the office are less easily 'staged' from a citizen perspective. When entering the office building, citizens are in a controlled environment in which they need to draw a number and wait for their turn to be called to an individual desk in a large public room. To create a sense of privacy, the individual desk is partially surrounded by a small room divider. Security guards in uniforms are visibly present at a distance, suggesting that citizens cannot misbehave. Nevertheless, there are small things that citizens can do to stage their performance. They often take with them shopping bags filled with paperwork (e.g. letters of debt collection agencies or bank statements) as evidence of their problems. They also rearrange the position of chairs to create more privacy to be able to feel comfortable to share personal details in a public environment. Street-level bureaucrats are aware that having personal conversations in an open public office is uncomfortable for citizens. They also object to the sleek interior design that contains several expensive designer lamps. They feel this is an inappropriate setting for asking citizens about their financial problems.

Citizens Trying to Change the Scripted Play of the Street-Level Bureaucrat

Despite the rhetoric of open dialogue and shared decision-making at the kitchen table or office desk, public encounters are highly scripted conversations due to guidelines that street-level bureaucrats use to structure the conversation. As a consequence, the room for citizens to conduct impression management is smaller than officially anticipated in policy rhetoric. Below, we first show how street-level bureaucrats use guidelines to structure the conversation and then outline how citizens react to this and what this means for how they conduct impression management.

In order to structure the conversation, street-level bureaucrats use the Self-Sufficiency Matrix that contains several 'life domains' (e.g. work and income, social network, mental health, societal participation etc.). This matrix is used to assess the level of self-sufficiency of citizens in different life domains which forms the basis of a digital client plan. As a result of the broad spectrum of questions asked, the conversations often come across as an inquisition into the personal life of citizens. This can be daunting for citizens, especially when

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questions are asked at a high pace. In the following observation of a kitchen table conversation, the citizen seems to feel increasingly resigned:

> *Street-level bureaucrat Mieke (pseudonym) quickly completes her questionnaire, in which different life domains are asked consecutively. Mieke asks a man with mental problems: 'when was the last time you went there (neighbourhood walk-in point)?' He answers: 'that was a long time ago'. He wants to continue talking, but Mieke cuts it off and abruptly introduces a new subject: 'And furthermore, with schizophrenia, is that stable, do you notice … ?' He answers with a long drawn-out 'yesaaaaahaaa'. 'If I get symptoms, I will contact the general practitioner.' Mieke does not elaborate on this, but asks a new question: 'Your medicines are otherwise good?' Mieke continues to ask questions at high speed: 'You are not familiar with addictions? And the criminal justice system, have you come into contact with them before?' 'Well,' says Mieke apologetically and somewhat uncomfortably, 'I'll just go through the list.'* (Fieldnotes of observation of kitchen table conversation, respondent A, 14 January 2020)

Despite being overwhelmed by the quick-fire questions, citizens do attempt to change the protocolized nature of the conversation by shifting the script to their own life narrative. For example they talk about traumatic life events such as the death of a partner or provide a detailed account of all their medical complaints to stress their need for public support. By doing so, they create the impression of being lonely and/or needing care rather than conforming themselves to the policy ideal of the 'self-reliant' and 'co-producing' citizen. As becomes clear from the following conversation, however, the citizen's attempt to change the script to her own life narrative may not be very successful:

> *'I often complain to my daughter-in-law Angela, my back my back! I can't cope anymore'. Street-level bureaucrat Hilde (pseudonym) is looking for an underlying cause of these complaints: 'Is your posture the cause of this pain? Your weight?' She answers: 'I have just lost weight since my husband passed away'. Hilde further asks: 'Do you also discuss your weight with your doctor? Your knees are bothering you because of your weight. But it is also difficult to move well because of your weight'. She does not go into the problem of being overweight, but focuses on her relationship with the GP: 'I don't know the GP very well if I'm honest. And I'm mad at the doctor. When my husband was ill he said: we don't visit for a chill. And now he is in the grave! I'll never forget that: August the 15th was the last day he was home!' Her voice rises due to emotions. Hilde does not respond to this and excuses herself: 'I will continue with other questions. Do you have any other means of transport?'* (Fieldnotes of observation kitchen table conversation, respondent H, 14 March 2019)

Due to time pressure and the need to gather as much information to assess eligibility of care, the street-level bureaucrat does not respond to this life story with empathy, but moves back to the topic list, thereby limiting the room of the citizen to provide her own perspective and jointly explore what is needed.

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Although some citizens are keen to mobilize their own life stories as a way to conduct impression management, others are more reluctant. They sometimes stay silent when street-level bureaucrats ask questions about their personal life, thereby silently refusing to go along with the scripted play of the street-level bureaucrat. Some citizens object more openly against the inquisitive nature of the conversation:

> *'It's a bit odd. I come here with a question, but I have to share my whole life story!'* (Fieldnotes of observation at the office help desk, respondent I, 14 February 2020)

The most outspoken form of protest against too intrusive questioning is 'leaving the stage', thereby closing off the opportunity to conduct impression management. For example this happened during a public encounter between a pregnant woman with inappropriate housing (an attic without a bathroom) and a street-level bureaucrat who assessed whether she was eligible for an urgency statement that would move her up the waiting list for social housing. Whereas the pregnant woman reasoned from a rights-based perspective and performed the role of a citizen 'in need' claiming her rights, the street-level bureaucrat reasoned from the perspective of the citizens' social network and self-responsibility:

> *Street-level bureaucrat Ona (pseudonym) asks several questions about the social network of the pregnant woman: 'Do you have family in the Netherlands? Can't you go there?' She does not seem to like this line of questioning and holds off the possibility of involving her network: 'No, that is not possible, my family's benefits will be reduced in that case'. Ona then asks about her partner who is now abroad: 'What will your partner do when he is in the Netherlands? Does he have a job?' She is visibly annoyed by all the questions the street-level bureaucrat asks: 'Why all those questions? Those questions aren't important, are they? I almost regret coming here … . I am Dutch, why am I not entitled to a house?! Everyone gets priority, but not me, while I am pregnant! That is unfair.' After the conversation has ended, Ona reflects on her own role during an informal interview with the researcher: 'She was really getting on my nerves. She just thinks she's entitled to something. That I immediately have an answer to her question. But I need to know more things about her, take a broader view. She didn't like that.' … . The street-level bureaucrat opens a website to look up the official criteria for an urgency statement. 'I see the criterion here: the problem for which you want to request an urgent declaration must not have been caused by yourself'. However, the woman caused the problem herself, however crude it may be. She became pregnant herself.'* (Fieldnotes of observation at municipal help desk, respondent C, 14 February 2020)

The above reasoning shows how the street-level bureaucrat has internalized the policy discourse on self-responsibility and the involvement of the social network, which results in a strict application of the eligibility criteria, rather than an open dialogue about tailored solutions.

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In addition to leaving the stage as a protest against too intrusive questioning, some citizens opt for a more diplomatic approach to redirect the scripted play of the street-level bureaucrat. For example, they create the impression that they are knowledgeable about the law, thereby trying to outsmart the street-level bureaucrat on his/her own territory. They also test the legal knowledge of street-level bureaucrats by asking to justify decisions based on the law:

> *Older mother during a kitchen table conversation: 'We always have the legal texts on the table during a kitchen table conversation. "Nice" how people react when they do not know the law. But of course it is too crazy for words!'* (Twitter message, 29 January 2018)

> *During the kitchen table conversation: Tip from mother: 'My standard question is always Mrs/Sir, can you submit the article of law in which I can find what you say at a detailed level. Then it becomes quiet' #where is that mentioned* (Twitter message, 29 January 2018)

By mobilizing the law, citizens attempt to equalize the unequal power balance. They also do this by asking a third party to be present during the conversation with the street-level bureaucrat. This can be an independent client supporter that is able to recognize and mobilize professional jargon to turn the conversation in the citizen's favour:

> *I had someone 'on my side', a social worker from GGNet. She knows how to use the right words. Good luck!* (Twitter message, 14 January 2019)

In addition to independent client supporters, citizens also ask family members to be present and support them during the conversation in conducting the 'accurate' impression of how dependent they are. For example, when citizens claim they have difficulty walking long distances, family members can back this up by acting as eyewitnesses. Moreover, family members provide 'cues' to citizens when they are overwhelmed by the questioning of the street-level bureaucrat and/or do not understand the implications of the questions. In the following observation of a kitchen table conversation, the street-level bureaucrat asks an older man who currently has difficulty using the stairs, whether he is willing to move to an apartment on the ground floor without stairs. He replies quietly without much enthusiasm:

> *'Well yes, as long as there is room for a work place … .' The daughter is clearly not pleased with this answer and directs her attention to her dad while raising her tone of voice: 'What did you just say to me? Dad, just say it! What did you just say to me?? "I'm not moving anymore!" She asks you, tell her.'* (Fieldnotes of observation kitchen table conversation, respondent J, 14 March 2019)

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Cues like these can be important conversation turners, redirecting the scripted play in a different direction. In this particular case, the citizen shifted his performance from a cooperative citizen, who obligingly went along the street-level bureaucrat's line of reasoning (moving house), to a citizen claiming his rights for housing adjustments in his current home.

Role Inconsistencies in Citizen Impression Management: Credibility Issues and the Need for Facework

When interacting with street-level bureaucrats during public encounters, citizens try to create a credible impression of themselves as 'in need of care' in order to convince the street-level bureaucrat to judge their eligibility for public support favourably. For example, they stress the severity of their medical limitations and complaints by showing all their medication or they mobilize attention to their body by physically touching parts of their bodies that ache or do not function properly. They also engage in physical re-enactment by showing difficult body movements, such as climbing the stairs on their hands and knees.

In some cases, however, street-level bureaucrats were not convinced by the credibility of citizens' impression management. This was especially the case when citizens changed roles mid-scene, thereby causing role inconsistency. In the following observation of a kitchen table conversation the citizen changed roles back and forth between 'needy citizen' and 'self-reliant' citizen when she realized that the street-level bureaucrat is not inclined to finance house adjustments when they are too costly and moving house is in fact a more cost-effective option when physical limitations are too severe:

> *At the beginning of the conversation, the woman emphasizes the seriousness of her physical limitations which lead to difficulty with climbing stairs: she explains how she climbs the stairs on her hands and knees. She would therefore like a stairlift and a mobility scooter to become more mobile outside the home. A ramp should also be installed for the scooter. Street-level bureaucrat Hilde (pseudonym) emphasizes that the municipality only reimburses home adjustments if not too many other costly adjustments have to be made simultaneously: 'For example, the ramp, that means a home adjustment which entails costs. If the municipality is going to assess whether we are going to adapt the house, we need to see what else needs to be adapted. And in your case that is not only outside, you also have trouble with the stairs.' The woman responds to this by changing her role, she is now no longer needy, but presents herself as self-reliant: 'I have no problem with the stairs, really!' ... Hilde checks whether this is correct and asks a follow-up question: 'And how do you walk the stairs, do you put 2 feet on 1 step?' The woman denies this: 'no, no.' Hilde is asking additional follow-up questions: 'Is this how you make the switch?' The woman answers: 'With the help of the railing, I hold on and pull myself up.' Street-level bureaucrat Hilde: 'But it's not very easy?' The woman now switches back to the previous role of needy citizen: 'No, frankly, then I walk upstairs on my hands and knees.' Hilde concludes: 'That's what I mean, if you describe how you*

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> *walk and how much difficulty you have moving around, I can't imagine that the stairs are not a problem.'* (Fieldnotes of observation kitchen table conversation, respondent H, 14 March 2019)

In this particular case, the role inconsistency prompted further questioning by the street-level bureaucrat, who wanted to check whether the new impression of self-reliant citizen was credible. The answers given do not suggest to the street-level bureaucrat that the role transition from needy to self-reliant citizen is credible.

Credibility issues are not just caused by sudden role transitions that citizens undertake themselves. Sometimes impression management by citizens is disrupted by the performance of other actors. Family members can give signs that undermine the performance that is given. For example this is the case in the following interaction between a citizen with mental and physical disabilities and two street-level bureaucrats. Whereas previously in the conversation, the citizen had emphasized the fact that he lacked a social network and therefore needed social support, this impression of a lonely citizen was undermined when his brother made a surprise visit. In addition to this, the fact that the citizen forgot to walk with his prosthesis caused further credibility issues:

> *The doorbell is ringing, thereby interrupting the story of Mr. Anjavit (pseudonym) about customized support. Mr. Anjavit gets up and walks without a prosthesis to open the door. 'Oh' says street-level bureaucrat Mieke surprised to street-level bureaucrat Sophia: 'He is able to walk without a prosthesis'. Mr. Anjavit returns to the kitchen table area where we are all sitting. 'It's nothing', he says, ignoring the doorbell. Then there is a knock on the window which is positioned next to the kitchen table. The person outside keeps on knocking. It turns out to be the brother of Mr. Anjavit. He is not pleased with the visit of his brother: 'That's my brother, he comes by once every 100 years! What a coincidence! I don't need that now!' The brother persistently keeps on knocking on the window. But Mr. Anjavit refuses to let him in. He stoically continues his story about support. Both street-level bureaucrats seem to find this peculiar and ask a couple of times if he shouldn't open the door for his brother. Mr. Anjavit does not respond to these questions and continues his own story.* (Fieldnotes of observation kitchen table conversation, respondent A, 14 January 2020)

As becomes clear, the citizen in question ignores the disruption of his performance by his brother and continues his own story. This can be interpreted as a form of facework: acting as though nothing is wrong, thereby symbolically saving face. Other forms of facework that citizens engage in are providing mitigating circumstances for problems and ignoring compromising questions by street-level bureaucrats into their lifeworld by moving on to a different topic. These examples show that during public encounters citizens need to constantly

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deal with threats to the credibility of their performances by conducting forms of facework that are based on avoidance or mitigation.

The Final Act: Being a Victim, Child of God or Dead Body in a Coffin

Public encounters have a ritual to mark the ending of the encounter: a final act. In the final act, street-level bureaucrats signal to citizens that the conversation is about to end and citizens can make a last attempt to conduct impression management, thereby trying to influence decision-making.

At the office desk, public encounters usually end with the ritual of street-level bureaucrats making a practical gesture: this could vary from printing out a list of contact details, such as neighbourhood community centres, making a referral to different organizations to provide support or making a final note in the digital dossier. This practical gesture has a symbolic function: to show to citizens that the public encounter is nearing the end, while simultaneously showing that citizens are supported, even though this support would be given by another organization/department. Citizens reacted to the ending of the public encounter in different ways. While many thanked the street-level bureaucrat for their support and did not use the final act to conduct new impression management, there were also citizens who explicitly objected to the ending of the conversation. This was especially the case when citizens felt they were given the runaround because they were being referred to another department:

> *'They couldn't help me and referred me back to this help desk. I am being sent from pillar to post!' Street-level bureaucrat Katherine (pseudonym) explains to the young woman that young people under the age of 27 should always be helped by the youth help desk: 'I should actually send you back to the youth help desk.' … . The woman expresses her frustration: 'It is frustrating that I am dismissed every time!'* (Fieldnotes of observation at the municipal help desk, respondent K, 14 February 2019)

Protests like these could be effective, especially when citizens successfully created the impression of being a victim of unjust treatment by the system. In those cases, street-level bureaucrats would postpone the ending of the conversation by making a call to another organization/department and sorting things out. This shows that citizen impression management can be effective in terms of influencing decision-making of street-level bureaucrats, even if this takes place in the final act.

Compared to the public encounters at the office desk, the kitchen table conversations in citizens' private homes usually had a different final act. Because these conversations were viewed as an official moment to assess the eligibility for support, the ritual ending of the conversation referred to 'the decision' by

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the street-level bureaucrat. In some cases, the street-level bureaucrat indicated at the end of the conversation what his/her decision would be, e.g. allocating support for housing adjustments, home care or transport. In other cases, this decision was less easy to make. In those cases, street-level bureaucrats symbolically expressed the difficult nature of the decision by making 'balancing' hand gestures, showing to the citizen that different interests needed to be balanced, such as costs, the attainability of informal care and safety. Especially when there was room for doubt, citizens tried to influence the decision-making by conducting impression management in the final act. Some openly pleaded for a desirable outcome (i.e., allocation of services). For example, this was done by a citizen who conveyed the impression that she was a child of God and therefore likely to receive a favourable decision:

> *At the end of the conversation, street-level bureaucrat Hilde (pseudonym) informs Mrs. Aspri (pseudonym) that she may appeal if the decision is not positive. She reacts emotionally to this notification, directs her eyes towards the ceiling, and exclaims in a forceful pleading voice: 'It is positive, it is positive, I am a child of God, God will not abandon me!'* (Fieldnotes of observation kitchen table conversation, respondent H, 4 February 2019)

In other cases, influencing of decision-making was less explicit. When street-level bureaucrats had to make decisions about the allocation of housing adjustments (e.g. stair lifts or bathroom reconstructions), citizens tried to influence the decision by creating the impression of themselves as being 'rooted' in their neighbourhood and their own house. For example, they shared stories about neighbours that cared for them or told the street-level bureaucrat how personally attached they were to the house they had lived in their whole life. They thereby conveyed the message that they wanted to stay in their own home (with the help of housing adjustments) rather than move house. Some citizens brought home this point in an emotional way: the only way they would leave their own home was dead in a coffin. Others used financial arguments to argue for the allocation of housing adjustments rather the option of moving house. They claimed that the lack of affordable housing and high rental prices would make them financial victims falling into a poverty trap. Street-level bureaucrats were likely to take into account these arguments in their decision-making. However, they did draw a line when citizens' health was rapidly deteriorating due to progressive illnesses. In those cases, street-level bureaucrats were inclined to argue for moving house given the costliness of many future housing adjustments. To soften the financial blow a little bit, street-level bureaucrats offered financial reimbursement for moving house. They also offered citizens the option of using this reimbursement for other purposes than officially allowed. When citizens decided to stay in their own home even though housing adjustments would not be allocated, they could use this reimbursement to par-

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tially cover the costs of housing adjustments, thereby forsaking their 'right' to make any new claims in the near future.

10.6 CONCLUSION

Building on Goffman's (1971 [1959]) dramaturgical analysis of social interaction, we empirically analysed how citizens conduct impression management during public encounters with street-level bureaucrats. So far, there has been little attention for how impression management by citizens is affected by new policy ideals and institutional rules regarding shared decision-making and co-production of support via the involvement of citizens' social networks. As a result, it is unclear whether citizens are likely to align their presentation of self with new roles of participatory citizen and co-producer or whether they resist these roles by claiming their legal entitlements to public services. We therefore zoomed in on a recent Dutch case of public encounters in the context of decentralizations and the introduction of the Dutch Social Support Act (2015). According to this Act, street-level bureaucrats and citizens are expected to jointly explore tailored and personalized solutions for problems rather than automatically claiming legal entitlements to services. This joint exploration can take place at the kitchen table in people's home – a place that symbolizes informal and open conversations – but also at the municipal help desk, where citizens first ask for help when experiencing problems. Below, we discuss our findings of impression management of citizens *before* and *during* the public encounter and reflect on these findings based on the literature. Given the far-reaching nature of citizens' responsibilization in Dutch social care policy, the findings can only be transferred to similar public sector contexts, while being less applicable to contexts with low levels of citizen responsibilization.

Our findings reveal that the policy rhetoric of open dialogue and shared decision-making creates ambiguity for citizens in anticipation of public encounters that still need to take place. In line with findings of Van Hees *et al.* (2020), our analysis of Twitter messages and interviews shows that citizens do not exactly know what to expect and especially experience kitchen table conversations as a black box. To deal with this ambiguity, some citizens rehearse their presentation of self by conducting role plays with the help of citizen support groups 'backstage'. In these role plays, citizens are advised to put emphasis on their limitations rather than their capabilities to ensure that they are deemed eligible for public services. In addition, citizens also inform themselves about eligibility criteria of street-level bureaucrats and sometimes request the help of an independent client adviser to be present during the public encounter to have someone 'at their side' who knows the professional jargon and is able to act in their best interests. This reveals that citizens experience the

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kitchen table conversations not as equal and open dialogues but as an unequal negotiation in which their eligibility for access to public services is at stake. As part of impression management, citizens set the stage by tidying up their home and sometimes removing 'evidence' of their social network, such as photos of family members. This shows that some citizens, despite their experience of ambiguity, still strategically anticipate that street-level bureaucrats will instrumentally mobilize their social network for the provision of informal care. When interpreting these findings, it is important to note that not all citizens prepare their frontstage performance to such an extent. In fact, citizen support groups indicate that only a minority of citizens with social and professional capital invest much time in this preparation, are able to access the help of independent client advisers and have the capabilities to play with professional jargon and criteria that provide them with an advantage when entering 'negotiations'. This implies that inequalities between citizens are likely to increase when ambiguity in policy creates room for negotiations during public encounters (see also Bredewold *et al.* 2018).

Our observations of impression management conducted *during* the public encounter provide a sobering account of how 'open', 'shared' and 'co-produced' decision-making actually is in 'the frontstage'. Both public encounters at the office desk and at the kitchen table are often highly scripted performances in which street-level bureaucrats use the self-sufficiency matrix to guide their questioning about different life domains of citizens. The underlying assumption is that tailored and personalized solutions that align with the needs and capabilities of citizens and their social network are only possible when the citizen's lifeworld is fully captured and inventoried (Needham 2011). As a result, citizens often experience a crossfire of questions about personal issues on a wide range of topics, even if citizens only want help with a specific question. The risk of integral questioning is that it can lead to 'greedy governance' (Boutellier and Trommel 2018: 10) in which citizens are expected to reveal their lifeworld to street-level bureaucrats with the aim of making it governable and serviceable to municipal goals, such as the involvement of the social network in co-creation of support.

Despite the protocolized nature of public encounters, however, citizens engage in subtle and less subtle forms of impression management in order to direct the conversation in a different direction. Rather than adopting the role of co-producer, citizens often create the impression that they are 'in need' of public support and therefore entitled to public provision. This need is justified in different ways: by arguing that family members cannot be involved in support, stressing their physical/mental limitations by pointing to ailing body parts and showing objects like medicinal pills or sharing stories about anxieties. This impression management of 'need', however, is a careful balancing act. For example, when citizens realize that they are deemed too dependent

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in order to be eligible for housing adjustments in their current home, they switch to more self-reliant roles. These sudden role transitions can lead to credibility threats when street-level bureaucrats do not believe these transitions to be genuine, which further prompts inquisitive questioning. In those cases, citizens need to deal with threats to their credibility by conducting facework. For example, they do this by avoiding or ignoring difficult questions, which sometimes sparks surprise or irritation among street-level bureaucrats.

When reflecting on the role of power dynamics in citizen impression management, it may at first sight seem that the impression of neediness suggests little citizen agency. Compared to citizens as co-producers, citizens asking for help are often placed lower on the participation ladder in terms of agency and decision-making power. However, as Mik-Meyer and Villadsen (2013) point out, the mobilization of need and victimhood may be a powerful manifestation of agency when this enables citizens to achieve what they want. Our findings also indicate that impression management can sometimes be effective when citizens get the right referral, are able to avoid the involvement of family members and get access to certain services. At the same time, impression management by citizens has its boundaries too. Citizens need to operate within the situational boundaries of a scripted conversation. Impression management therefore remains a careful balancing act that requires citizens to 'work with' the dynamics of the situation while simultaneously thinking, acting and presenting themselves in such a way that the situation is redefined in favourable terms. Hence, impression management is therefore always based on situational forms of power that particularly become visible when zooming in on the interactional level of the public encounter (Mik-Meyer and Villadsen 2013; Bruhn and Ekstrom 2017). Given the fact that current studies on changing welfare states often still focus on macro-level changes (Castles, Leibfried, Lewis, Obinger and Pierson 2012; Hemerijck 2013), it can be fruitful to combine this with insights from micro-sociological studies at the interaction level to get a more on-the-ground understanding of how changing policy expectations and rules are translated, reconfigured and subverted in the communicative 'in-between' space of public encounters.

NOTE

1. Fieldnotes and interview transcripts are available upon individual request on the condition that data are used anonymously.

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