Opening the black box of the municipal government: exploring the lived experiences of local public servants with citizen participation and decentralisation in The Netherlands[†]

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Abstract
Citizen participation and empowerment are high on the political agenda of Western European welfare states. They are often pursued through processes of decentralisation with an appeal to 'place-based' working. Existing research focuses on citizen experiences or policymaker motivations, neglecting the perspectives of (municipal) public servants as mediators. Using an ethics of care framework, we examine the concept of 'privileged irresponsibility' within the context of local decision-making processes to help us understand how public servants negotiate local initiative within the spaces of local decision-making. Drawing on semi-structured in-depth interviews with twenty-three municipal public servants and managers, we show that they frequently experience an absence of care and eschew joint responsibility for concerns voiced by citizens. We show how 'privileged irresponsibility' depends on invisibility and normativity and is the outcome of local political relations and institutional pressures. 'Tokenist' forms of participation make it difficult for municipal public servants to take up 'caring' responsibilities towards citizens, with effects on their job satisfaction.

Introduction

The appearance of new forms of territorial governance has changed the role of the state in European society, shifting responsibility for the delivery of public policies for social services (broadly defined) to the local level – a process we refer to as 'decentralisation'. Decentralisation is accompanied by a rhetoric of local

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empowerment, improved public participation and activation of community resources and fundamentally shifts responsibility to the local scale (Coaffee & Johnston, 2005). To understand these shifts and how they are enacted in local governments, we must go beyond a consideration of the formal juridical or statutory dimensions of responsibility to examine its normative and ethical dimensions (Eckert & Eckert, 2020). This requires an 'ethics of care' perspective derived from feminist political theory. It stresses relationships and practices over rules and procedures and focuses on the moral judgments made in the material contexts in which policies are made and enacted, rather than on the abstract principles enshrined in laws.

Local government in the Netherlands is organised in a tiered system within a unitary state. The system comprises municipalities, provinces and water boards, with their own responsibilities and governance structures. We focus on municipalities, which range from cities to rural communities. Municipalities are responsible for a wide range of local services and policies, including implementing a coherent and integrated policy for care and support of vulnerable groups. Legislative power is shared by the mayor, municipal council and alderpeople. The alderpeople and the mayor hold executive authority, but the alderpeople and the municipal council have distinct responsibilities. The municipal council (*Gemeenteraad*) is the elected body of the municipality. It sets policy guidelines for the Council of Mayor and Alderpeople and oversees their implementation. Public servants work alongside elected representatives and carry out policy implementation, service delivery, regulatory enforcement, financial management and community engagement. Our interest is in how public servants achieve deliberation with and participation of citizens in spatial policy, including initiatives that citizens suggest as initiators.

We argue that the legitimacy of local government's public interest mission is crucially dependent on whether decentralisation results in an improved 'ethic of care' for citizens (Tronto, 2013). This requires us to look beyond rules and processes to the practical, moral judgements made by local policymakers in service delivery. In policy rhetoric, decentralisation is predicated on collaborative arrangements between citizens, civic associations, private companies and local government bodies (Van Wijk et al., 2019), working in the public interest in participatory ways. However, as we show, the decision to implement an innovation derived from a participatory process takes place in a 'black box' – a phrase used by an interviewee. The black box is a useful metaphor because it describes the lack of specificity about the internal workings of the political system. While the literature on participatory processes is abundant (King et al., 1998; Mondada, 2013), little is known of what happens inside the black box after a participatory process has been undertaken and initiatives proposed (Fig. 1). This question is pressing because the Participation Society raises expectations about the implementation of initiatives proposed by
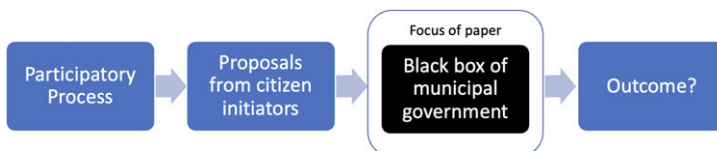

Figure one: the black box of municipal government in the participatory society

Figure 1. The black box of municipal government in the Participatory Society.

community-based initiators (Voorberg et al., 2017) who have little or no access to the municipal spaces where a final decision is made. What happens in the black box is an important part of how this Participation Society is brought into being and how power is constituted in local participatory spaces.

Public servants and alderpeople have a suite of 'nested responsibilities' that do not necessarily amount to a collectively held vision. In the black box, public servants play an important, yet little analysed, role in conducting complex negotiations between citizens and the municipality (Kazepov, 2010). This is unfamiliar territory for a group that tends to be 'thematic' experts, executing the decisions of politicians in a top-down way. Decentralisation requires them to collaborate with public servants from other departments as well as citizens and civic organisations. Meanwhile, the black box has boundaries – discussed below – which are hard to penetrate for those outside the municipal government.

We contribute to research on the role of (municipal) public servants in institutionalising decentralisation and citizen participation (Escobar, 2022; Eichhorn et al., 2022) through our (micro)focus on their experiences of co-creating service design and delivery in a rural municipality in the Netherlands. When innovations arising from a participation process are taken back to the municipality for delivery, they enter the black box of municipal government, where public servants must negotiate these local needs with the municipal administration and elected politicians. We describe the struggles public servants face in their bureaucratic institutional settings when trying to mediate between the expectations of the municipal council and citizen organisations.

We begin by situating our analysis using the ethics of care perspective before introducing the method and context of the research. The findings section focuses on the experiences of public servants and the dilemmas they face, drawing on the concept of privileged irresponsibility. We discuss examples of the patterns and elements of care that are often overlooked and taken for granted (Tronto, 2013). The conclusion looks at the impact that these experiences have on supporting or opposing participatory practices at the local level.

Participation society, legislative reform and an ethics of care

Decentralisation is used as an umbrella term for the territorial reorganisation of policymaking (Kazepov, 2010) pervasive across Europe and beyond (Conyers, 1986). It aims to bring government closer to the people and promote participation and local empowerment (Lowndes & Skelcher, 1998). It is claimed that local institutions are better placed to identify the needs of the citizens and develop tailor-made solutions to address them. However, critics argue that decentralisation strengthens 'local elites' rather than the citizenry and thus reinforces existing inequalities (Conyers, 1986).

In the Netherlands, the decentralisation of responsibilities away from the central state is referred to as the 'Participation Society', which was implemented in 2015 via legislation including the Youth Act, the Social Support Act and the Participation Act. The aim is to encourage people to use their resources and network to care for themselves and the people around them who need support and care, thereby

redistributing public goods (Blijleven & van Hulst, 2021; Power & Hall, 2018). The Netherlands is not unique: Other Western governments also are pursuing decentralisation, believing that the level of reliance upon professionally designed and delivered care services is unsustainable (Verschuere et al., 2012).

The Participation Society is linked with the notion of 'co-creation': the involvement of and collaboration with citizens in the conception, development, planning and delivery of services (Voorberg et al., 2015). For Voorberg et al. (2015), co-creation reflects an important shift in public management models and is informed by a broader narrative on how public organisations should address citizens' needs. Osborne stresses citizens' experience as the ultimate determinant of value in co-creation: 'it is how citizens integrate these resources with their own needs, experience and expectations that will create value in their lives' (Osborne et al., 2021, p. 668). Echoing this trend towards co-creation, the Dutch government introduced the 'do-democracy' ('*doe-democratie*'), aimed at creating space for citizens' initiatives in social and spatial planning outside the remit of the municipal services and council. The government claims that 'citizens not only want to be represented but want to be able to decide for themselves, especially over those issues that directly affect them' (Raad voor het Openbaar Bestuur [ROB], 2012). To this end, the new 'Environmental Act' (implemented in January 2024) imposes compulsory citizen participation in integrated policymaking.

However, co-creation (or do-democracy) is not without its problems. Some of the 'dark sides' of co-creation have been explored in the context of health research (Oliver et al., 2019; Williams et al., 2020), but they extend to other public service contexts. For example, critical scholars such as Dekker (2019) have argued that small-scale collective action can shift focus away from democratic debates and decision-making about what exactly it means to be a 'caring' and 'responsible' society. The Dutch government's decentralisation and co-creation strategy has heavily impacted public services (Voorberg & Bekkers, 2016). Many municipalities have experienced reductions in public services, which profoundly impact citizen participation and support provided by public servants. Governments should, therefore, not assume that co-creation is automatically beneficial for all but carefully consider the conditions required to ensure that collaboration and participation genuinely address the needs of citizens (Dekker, 2019).

An ethics of care perspective, deriving from feminist scholarship (Barnes & Brannelly, 2015), can offer a new way of understanding the newly reconfigured set of local interdependencies created by decentralisation and co-creation (Barnes, 2012). In this perspective, 'care' can be defined as 'everything we do to maintain, continue and repair our "world" so that we can live in it as well as possible' (Fisher & Tronto, 1990, pp. 40–41). Care is not exclusive to private environments but is essential in every sphere and activity in society, including institutions (Tronto, 2013). Moreover, all caring practices rely on each other to succeed (Tronto, 2013). This view of 'care' as complex reciprocity in which everyone is seen as both a giver and a receiver of care (Milligan & Wiles, 2010) is the basis for what Tronto calls 'caring democracy'.

Using this broad view of care as both an analytical lens and an empirical focus, the new Environment Act can be analysed in terms of the promises it makes to increase the collective caring capacity of municipal governments by developing a shared understanding of (local) caring responsibilities (Voorburg et al., 2017). The

Act represents a significant shift in how environmental and spatial planning is managed in the Netherlands, with public servants being central to its implementation. Their tasks range from developing comprehensive local plans to engaging with the public.

While the rhetoric of the Act suggests that an authentic reallocation of power should take place (Arnstein, 1969), thereby achieving a higher level on the 'participation ladder', there are major challenges for local municipalities in shifting responsibility to cooperative arrangements between citizens, local associations, companies and local government bodies (Newman et al., 2004; Van Wijk et al., 2019). The Act makes participation mandatory, giving a legal basis to co-creation and strengthening local interdependencies between municipal government and citizens. Recognising this interdependence means every actor, whether government or citizen, needs to look beyond themselves and/or their organisations. Avoiding tokenism (Arnstein, 1969) requires the constant, public discussion and negotiation of personal as well as social and institutional (caring) responsibilities (Tronto, 2013). Below, we explore how the legal imperative impacts public servants when it comes to intensifying cooperation on and support for local initiatives.

Transformation of the role of municipal public servants

While there is scant research on public servants' experiences of citizen participation in the Netherlands (Blijleven & van Hulst, 2021), literature on public administration shows they are central in delivering decentralisation and countering possible drawbacks (Dean, 2023). According to the Dutch central state, public servants and local politicians have to acquire the skills to manage public engagement – presumably 'on the job', as the legislative reforms discussed above mean that public servants are already involved in direct, recurring and intensive interactions with citizens (Voorberg and Bekkers, 2016). Their role has transformed from 'desk-job bureaucrats' to a position closer to the 'front-line' with citizens, more akin to 'street-level bureaucrats' (Lipsky, 1980). 'Discretion' – the exercise of choice or judgement within established boundaries – is a key concept in understanding the role of street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1980). Are municipal public servants in this role powerful and crucial strategic local actors, fostering transparency and accountability while promoting the various local voices (Bartels, 2016)? How do they deliver on the reform promises without clear rules and guidelines to establish deliberative decision-making processes on a municipal level? To be able to 'take care' by enabling a good life for communities, public servants must constantly mediate the relationship between the ideals of the state and the realities of citizens (Osborne et al., 2021). In so doing, they make moral judgements about the best things to do in particular situations (Barnes, 2012). In the next section, we reflect on how privileged irresponsibility can help us understand the lived experience of these public servants as they navigate how decentralisation changes the distribution of responsibilities and whether they are equipped to take care of local needs.

About responsibilities and privileges

As government tasks are becoming increasingly complex under decentralisation, the level of interaction and interconnectedness between public servants and politicians increases, while their roles and positions vis-à-vis each other and citizens change. The concept of privileged irresponsibility can help us in investigating these changing roles and positions. Responsibility refers, from an ethics of care perspective, to a 'willingness to do something about identified needs in society' (Bozalek, 2015, p. 84). However, not all actors are equally equipped to meet their responsibilities. In particular, the structural position of actors and the different conditions under which they operate mean that some are more privileged than others. While we often associate the notion of privilege with personal advantage arising from birth, background, wealth or status, it can also be a feature of one's professional life. These types of collaborations or co-creations often start with resource imbalances (Molenveld et. al., 2021), especially where a particular job brings one into proximity with policymakers, policy influences, funders or lawmakers. While this is often analysed from the scope of 'discretion', research in 'discretion' highlights various techniques and strategies that define how it is applied in practice (Durose, 2011). In this paper, we want to use the lens of 'privilege' to look at these strategies.

Although the current social climate may suggest otherwise, 'privilege, in itself, is neither good nor bad. It just is' (Kimmel, 2018, p. 13). The crucial point from an ethics of care perspective is that privilege comes with the responsibility to make the most of the advantages one enjoys to the benefit of all. The first step of our inquiry is to investigate the privileges that local politicians and public servants have and the responsibilities that come with them. A complicating factor is that most people are not aware of their own privileges (Kimmel, 2018), largely because 'the dominant group' is often seen as the norm, which obscures their specific position of privilege. Those in dominant positions are hence often not inclined to pay attention to those in a different position, which makes it more difficult to see and empathise with the obstacles others face. Moreover, people in positions of relative power might have an interest in having 'their needs met without acknowledging that they can function because of the care they receive from others' (Bozalek, 2015, p. 85). This is one form of privileged irresponsibility: a disregard for how one is taken care of. Another is when one absents oneself (consciously or unconsciously) from (discussion about) responsibilities (Bozalek, 2015). Two concepts – invisibility and normativity – help us to explain these actions. When a problem is invisible (not immediately present or self-evident), it becomes easy to ignore. It is also easy, from a position of (political) privilege, to fail to challenge normative assumptions about the way things are and how social change can be implemented.

While most literature tends to herald the empowering potential of decentralisation and citizen participation, there is little empirical evidence of its processes and negotiations (Fenwick, 2012). This paper provides a micro-level empirical focus on public servants' perceptions and lived experiences of the decentralisation of care services, paying specific attention to the experiences of municipal public servants in the Netherlands who are involved in the local design and implementation of the Environmental Act. We ask how and to what extent they can bring the concerns and needs of participating citizens into the policymaking process and discussions with

elected politicians. The daily experiences of public servants demonstrate the dilemmas and competing loyalties public servants must navigate when operationalising decentralised social and spatial policies.

Method and ethics

The research was conducted in 2021 with public servants (and their managers) in a rural municipality in the Netherlands, which was selected because it was involved in preparations for implementing the (then) upcoming Environmental Act, and decided to work 'in the spirit of the new Act.' (manager [m] 5) before its formal implementation. Our focus is on public servants' experiences. We therefore do not pay much attention to (i) the specificities of environmental regulatory initiatives or (ii) the experiences of alderpeople. While this might have added further argumental nuance, we focused on public servants whose relationship with politicians in an era of greater participation is arguably changing.

A high standard of research ethics was practised at all times. Recognising that public servants operate in a hierarchical structure with complex power dynamics, participation was voluntary; all interviewees signed an informed consent form and could withdraw at any time. Transcripts were fully anonymised, making it impossible to identify participants and therefore avoiding professional or reputational damage to them. The research team reflexively examined their own positionality through frequent discussions, including our responsibility for improving the approach of municipalities as well as merely critiquing existing systems.

All interviewees, (municipal) public servants (ps; eighteen) and managers (five), were interviewed individually using semi-structured interviews. The interviews aimed to discuss their specific roles and responsibilities in organising the participation of citizens under the terms of the Environmental Act. We also sought to gather their insights into the roles of others on whom they depended for their tasks, notably local politicians. The interview protocol consisted of questions on (i) which steps were taken to implement the Environmental Act and the decentralisation of spatial policy, (ii) the challenges and dilemmas they were confronted with while dealing with these initiatives and (iii) their experiences with alderpeople and managers. Moreover, we reflected on how these cases, according to them, could and should be dealt with in the spirit of decentralisation. During the investigation, we discussed these issues concerning several current cases with the same participants in focus groups (twelve sessions of two hours each) and individually (three times; one hour each) regularly. The quotes used in this article are taken from these interviews. The interviews were transcribed, and during all sessions, the first author and a fellow researcher took extensive notes. We used an iterative approach to coding involving multiple rounds where the codes and categories were continuously revisited and refined to capture the meanings and themes emerging from the data (Weston et al., 2001). Iterative coding is a dynamic, flexible process that allows for the development of a deep and nuanced understanding of the data. Once saturation is reached, where additional scrutiny no longer yielded new insights or themes, we synthesised the findings, which are presented and discussed in the next section.

Division of roles between public servants and local politicians

According to the ethics of care perspective adopted in this article, the key to addressing the ethical dimension of service delivery lies in 'nested responsibilities', which means that all responsible actors rely on each other to succeed (Tronto, 2013). To recognise this interdependence, it is crucial that each involved actor knows about the others' positions, learns to understand their own and others' conditions of action better and is subsequently able to negotiate dilemmas and tensions resulting from these specific positions (Brannelly, 2018). An ethics of care perspective on decentralisation, therefore, goes beyond following formal rules and procedures and highlights the importance of enabling and negotiating new ways of working together, considering the different realities of the involved actors. Thus, before analysing the experiences of public servants in the context of decentralisation, we first need to briefly describe the formal division of roles between public servants and alderpeople.

Dutch municipalities have a formal division of roles: The elected municipal council sets policy; the executive (mayor and alderpeople) governs and executes policy; and public servants advise, implement and ensure legality. Alderpeople organise staff meetings with their public servants, during which the decisions are prepared; take part in weekly municipal executive meetings, where the decisions are made together with the mayor and other alderpeople; and are present at the municipal council meetings, where the decisions are explained and defended. In their political work, they are advised and supported by public servants whose role is to prepare decisions, check them against laws and current policies and implement decisions made by local politicians. Public servants are, hence, involved in policymaking but do not make political decisions themselves. As their role is 'to monitor continuity' (m1), the new Act asks for transparent municipal decision-making processes which demonstrate how decisions fit in with local policy, whether they can be implemented in practice and how decisions are arrived at. The weekly staff meeting between public servants and their alderperson is one such official, 'transparent' decision-making moment. However, behind the scenes, the formally delineated lines and roles between elected local politicians and public servants are often blurred.

> How should we deal with politics? With all those different interests? In the organisation itself, it is all about the facts. About substantive matters. Many colleagues struggle with this and how they can uncover political interests. (ps7).

Public servants feel that a political agenda is made to bear on their work and strongly informs their relationship with local politicians. The staff meetings, rather than enlightening the goals and tasks at hand for the public servant, often fuel their frustrations: 'I often feel like a pawn. I present an initiative internally. And then the games begin . . . It really brings me down.' (ps15). In what follows, we try to open the municipal 'black box in which a lot remains hidden and unspoken' (ps9).

One way of conceptualising the black box of social service delivery is to consider the politics inherent in the production of policy. By politics, we are referring to how decisions are made, by whom and for whose benefit (Tronto, 2013). Considering the

politics of policy delivery illuminates how decision-making is exclusive and maintained through extant practices. In this study, alderpeople and public servants create an 'insider' decision-making process predicated on extant practices. Those who determine how policy should be delivered are located in the black box, and the boundary between the inside and outside is hard to cross (Arshed et al., 2014). This is because, in de Certeau's (1984) terms, the bounded area is defined by the perceived limits of practice and technical knowledge. Inside the black box, meanings are created which are not available to those outside. Alderpeople perceive, conceive, construct and learn on the boundary point where strategy becomes delivery. The margin is determined by the difference between processes of governance (how to deliver strategic policy) and the pragmatic delivery of care (delivery of service). Adopting an institutional analytical approach allows us to open the 'black box' of how policy is formulated and practised without identifying and blaming individuals (Linder & Peters, 1990). Rather, it allows for the exploration of the interaction between actors and their institutional setting (Sotarauta & Pulkkinen, 2011). One way of exploring the inside of the black box is to look at blurred decision-making, to which we now turn.

Blurred decision-making

As stated, staff meetings are meant to be the place where there is a transparent discussion of all the alternative options for a particular decision, their strengths and weaknesses and any political considerations. In principle, they should be as open as possible. In practice, such discussions can be conditioned by unspoken agendas and competing priorities, such as:

> The alderperson curries favour with an initiator because the elections are upon us. And I, as a public servant, am a nuisance if I say something that does not fit their bill, even though I have reason to do so! (ps4).

Here, the transparency of the decision-making process is compromised by promises made by an alderperson, which diminish the public servant's power to consider the financial, administrative or legal practicalities of a proposal. Often, a position has already been taken. This is not spoken out loud by alderpeople:

> Of course not. No. We hear that from citizens. The alderperson then says, for instance: 'Why wouldn't that be possible. Of course it can be done. We'll take care of that.' And then the alderpeople find all kinds of reasons why it should be possible. (ps12).

In other cases, despite raised expectations, progress is slow.

> It is frustrating that expectations have been raised. Then the tactical play starts: distractions, delays. I'm not sure it is always deliberate, but smokescreens are definitely put up. And that all goes silent. (ps17).

Instead of a transparent conversation about what it means to jointly take care of citizens' needs, the decision-making process and the roles of alderpeople and public servants become blurred. Public servants feel dragged into the political arena, pushed – often in an implicit rather than explicit way – to carry out a decision no matter what their procedures and expertise guide them to do:

> You have to research it again. And once you've done that, you still have to find out more. That's how they lead you on time and again. This costs so much negative energy. (ps1).

Rather than being able to take care of citizens' needs and 'deliberately take into account a broad array of perspectives and values' (Abma et al., 2020, p. 132), public servants feel forced to do what alderpeople have in mind.

Invisibility and avoidance of accountability

Our case study shows how politicians can use evasiveness strategically. In response, public servants seek to 'make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions [avoidance of accountability] open', acting agilely and resourcefully to turn policy objectives to their own purposes (de Certeau, 1984, pp. 36–37). If the alderperson chooses to go against the advice of public servants, the municipal council must identify their decision as 'on the contrary', requiring alderpeople to explain their decisions and expose their interests and motivations. This is what alderpeople try to avoid by using staff meetings as a less public opportunity to shift responsibility for complicated decisions to public servants:

> They don't dare to go against the grain and say: 'this is the advice, but we decide differently against the advice.' No, they make me rewrite it. But I have an advisory role. I don't cooperate with that. So then we talk about it endlessly in the staff meetings. (ps13).

This is how alderpeople avoid public scrutiny of how their interests influence decision-making.

> They don't resort to name-calling or anything like that. I write an advice and they disagree. Then I have to formulate it differently . . . And they don't say clearly what they do want or whether they want to exclude something. It's just not put like that . . . They make you search for possibilities that aren't there. They make you come by until you're fed up. Until you write what they want. Until you cave in. (ps5).

Alderpeople can use an active managerial strategy to nudge public servants to 'adapt arguments, reformulate them or omit certain arguments' (cs6). In such cases, the written advice presents facts and arguments that are tailor-made to support a decision that the alderpeople have already arrived at. The advice provides a post hoc rationalisation that disguises the political unwillingness to make a certain decision and prevents alderpeople from being held responsible for a particular choice.

> The current alderperson keeps things close to their chest. Even though there is a unanimous assignment from the municipal executive, no less. He doesn't want this. How? Stalling everything. No, he is not obliged to explain this politically. It's just about the alderperson's own opinion (ps16).

Formally, alderpeople cannot decide on their own, since there is collegial governance in municipalities, which means the municipal executive, as a constitutional institution, is responsible and makes decisions as a whole.

> If the municipal executive had to deal with it, they would have to find supportive arguments. And the municipal clerk could play their part. But thanks to all the stalling, the municipal executive never has to deal with it. Nor does the municipal council. (ps6).

This type of deflection (strategy) manipulates the outcome in a certain direction without revealing motives. Therefore, proposals do not reach municipal executive meetings, as responsibility for delivery is deliberately passed to others in a cascade of devolved accountability. Both the municipal executive and council remain unaware of the practices through which alderpeople avoid accountability. Without corrective power to interrupt the established processes and hierarchies, neither the other alderpeople, the town clerk, nor the city council can intervene. This situation is paradoxical, as devolved responsibility of care is thought to be the universal panacea for community care provision. However, alderpeople can actively seek to deflect responsibility and leave public servants to traverse proprietary powers in opportunistic and unexpected ways.

What is clear from this evidence is that public servants develop tactics for managing their everyday job in relation to citizen participation. These tactics are reminiscent of de Certeau's (1984) explanation of how dominant orders (those with collective power) maintain systems and spaces through deploying 'strategies' (the implementation of hegemonic power) to regulate passive individuals. However, as de Certeau explained, passive individuals are not without agency and exert their agency through a series of 'tactics' that subtly subvert dominant strategies. Tactics are 'a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus' (de Certeau, 1984, p. 36), as detailed above. When the political strategy is to abdicate responsibility for a policy, individual tactics emerge. Tactics emerge diffusely and are temporal incursions that take advantage of opportunity spaces yet never achieve spatial superiority over a strategy. However, the lines of tactics deployed are very blurred and are a mixture of passing on responsibility, stalling and playing politics within the municipality. These tactics influence and shape how participatory processes feed into the decision-making process. All of this can create the conditions for the emergence of privileged irresponsibility, to which we now turn.

Privileged irresponsibility

In the previous sections, we examined how alderpeople can actively deploy a strategy of relinquishing responsibility. Viewed through an ethics of care lens, these practices represent what we term 'privileged irresponsibility'. The principal site in which this occurred was during staff meetings, which became an 'institutional

structure that deliberately diffuses and obscures lines of authority' (Tronto, 2013, p. 60). Alderpeople can use their privilege to either avoid delivering projects with which they disagree or push through projects in which they have a vested interest, to the endless frustration of public servants: As one public servant stated, 'I can't help citizens this way. You can't explain practices like these to them." (ps13).

However intentioned, these recurrent practices of deflection produce structural obstacles for local governments to adopt and deliver care for their citizens. The political machinations described by public servants create adverse conditions for them in their jobs. Public servants claim to be "Much better aware of the substantial possibilities and impossibilities of most initiatives than alderpeople" (ps10). They explain that there are different worlds:

> We deal in substantive matters and all things protracted. We stand for the general good and judicial equality. Long-term policies. Politicians are more about the short term. Alderpeople are there for four years and have to be re-elected (ps3).

From this position, public servants contribute insights about technical aspects of policymaking and provide feedback about interactions with other policy domains or information about citizens' situations. Their remit is to ensure transparency in the decision-making process. However, the actions of alderpeople are counter to this ethos, as they ensure the black box of responsibilities remains opaque. Decision-making can thus be deliberatively exclusive and participation limited. After 'lifting the cloak of invisibility' (Barnes, 2012, p. 3), we see that this can effectively create a culture of unwritten rules that public servants cannot discuss or challenge.

Tokenist participation

We now explore the patterns related to the normative dimension of (ir)responsibility by illustrating how, embedded in institutional structures, uncaring practices can establish structural patterns that complicate shared decision-making in the context of a 'participation society'. According to the interviewees, it is very difficult to go against unwritten rules. Public servants strongly feel this ethos: 'Participation is only used to make an impression' (ps3). The unwritten rule to prioritise issues of the municipal organisation above societal needs is described (Hayward et al., 2004, p. 100) as 'pseudo-participation', in which citizens' initiatives are disregarded. As several public servants reflected, 'participation is the buzzword here at town hall. But when it comes down to it, we don't really want that. We'd rather decide everything ourselves.' (ps14).

During 'genuine participation' (Hayward et al., 2004, p. 100), 'the initiators are heard' (ps17). The interviewees shared numerous examples of how they experience participation in practice and how it can influence their position:

> I was there myself when things were agreed upon. And now, for no reason, things are taken back. Because an alderperson doesn't want it anymore. And that's final. That's quite hard. To be the one that has to inform people of that.

I also work hard for people you know, and to do my job right. But then, it no longer has anything to do with that. It's just not right . . . (ps4).

Public servants care about how 'tokenism', described by (Dekker, 2019) as one of the dark sides of Dutch democracy, impacts citizens: 'I see the damage done. If you have at first agreed upon something, people will continue in that direction. They invest a lot. Time. Means. People are devastated . . . ' (ps9). This, in turn, undermines their relationships with citizens:

> The problem is that the outside world is onto it. They say: I want to talk to the alderperson. And all of a sudden, a no becomes a yes. People avoid us. Do you know what that feels like? (ps5).

Public servants believe the participatory narratives of alderpeople can be insincere and that they can use the discourse of citizen participation to promote their policies but fail to support officials in executing them: 'They only use the words if it suits them' (ps1). This creates a normative culture of disingenuous policy administration.

Normativity and established relations of power

This has an impact. Many public servants reflected that they often end up acting like 'thoughtless executives who just start running' (ps3 and 10). Further, they describe how they frequently end up acting 'irresponsibly', from the perspective of the needs voiced by citizens – not out of ill will but more often out of a desire to act according to what they think is expected.

> How that goes . . . they expect something from you. Before you know it, you've been assigned a certain role. And then you start behaving accordingly. I felt seen. Heard. But before you know it, you work in a way that doesn't suit you. I needed time to see that that is how it goes . . . After all, it's nice to belong. (ps2).

But there seems to be more to it:

> Formally, we do know our place. We shouldn't make decisions, for instance. But still . . . It's not easy to tell an alderperson off: 'this is just not right'. There will always be a hierarchical relationship . . . (ps18).

Raising doubts or criticisms and negotiating decisions with alderpeople is not easy, since 'the capacity to accept, reject or deflect assignments of responsibility (for care) are always processes in which relative power positions of those engaged in the negotiation shape the discussion as well as its outcome' (Jesenková, 2021, p. 175). Public servants are reluctant to speak out:

> Interviewer (i): Why can't you say how you see the file?
>
> ps: Fear. I somehow have the feeling that I will be taken down. I don't dare to take a firm stand. My colleagues just do what they're told. I think . . . So, can I just say . . . ?

i: What would happen if you did?

ps: I don't know exactly . . .

(ps13).

Although this public servant cannot articulate what can happen, even the idea of it creates a dynamic of power (Tronto, 2020).

> I'm quite safe myself, you know. I've been working here for a long time. I won't get fired just like. But still, you can be put on the sidelines. (ps8).

Although the new Environment Act should create a context in which care for citizens is central, public servants must operate within an existing normative institutional context with established power relations that feel unchangeable. The outcome is that public servants feel the pressure 'to start running' and do what (they think) is expected, in informal terms rather than according to their formally defined role.

Conclusions

This paper aims to open up the institutional 'black box' of municipalities in the Netherlands to provide insight into how localised forms of care in the context of decentralisation and co-creation policies are negotiated by multiple actors working at the municipal level, notably by public servants in their interactions with citizens and alderpeople. In so doing, we respond to the lacunae of research on how new community-based care policies are being operationalised, recognising that place-based, decentralised working has been adopted across Western European countries. We argue that, to understand the dimensions of the work of public servants in this process, we need to look beyond formal rules, procedures and abstract legal principles and instead focus on how decentralisation reorganises institutionally mediated relationships between public servants and elected local politicians and how these shape their practices in the inner workings of the municipal decision-making process. In this sense, it is probably more appropriate to talk about a 'grey box' than a 'black box' since the inner workings of municipal operations are not completely unknown but are certainly opaque and, as we show, very much a bounded area defined by the perceived limits of practice and technical knowledge. Undoubtedly, inside the black box, meanings are created (though not necessarily shared or mutually agreed upon) which are not available to those outside.

During in-depth interviews with public servants and managers in a Dutch municipality, we identified a disjuncture between the strategic aims of the state legislation and the actions of politicians and the public servants tasked with delivering localised care. Without clear political planning and lines of responsibility, we witnessed individuals implementing their own localised tactics that materially affected the delivery process. In particular, we witnessed how elected politicians in the municipal executive can become one of the main barriers in enabling devolved

participatory practices through the tactic of 'privileged irresponsibility'. We illustrated how, despite the aims of decentralisation to improve the participation of citizens in local policymaking, the institutional position of alderpeople and the expectations and rules governing their relationship with public servants put them in a position in which they can remove themselves from public accountability. Through adopting a position of privileged irresponsibility (i.e., passing responsibility to another), they can remove themselves from criticisms of the political choices they make concerning the issues raised by citizens in participation processes. The detailed accounts of public servants paint a widely shared picture of privileged irresponsibility on the part of the municipal executive branch. While in theory, according to the abstract legal principles in the new Environment Act, public servants are crucial actors in executing local participatory policies, they are often unable to do so and, in preference, adopt tactics predicated an ethics of care. This results from their lack of space to jointly analyse and negotiate different interests on behalf of citizens with local elected politicians.

While the promises of participation and decentralisation embedded in the Act require concerted cooperation at all levels of government, public servants feel they often need to undertake this unilaterally, which is not without consequence. Public servants admit they adhere to and even add to what they perceive to be an irresponsible, uncaring institutional culture. Therefore, discussing and negotiating responsibilities necessitate not only an assessment of formal rules and procedures and abstract legal principles but also an in-depth analysis of the relations between public servants and alderpeople and the day-to-day moral judgments and policymaking practices they engage in in the new institutional context created by the decentralisation of spatial policies.

Our study opens up new challenges for future research. In an era of healthcare 'localism' (Sandhu et al., 2022), paying closer attention to small things that can impact community health and wellbeing may be of significant benefit and aid neighbourhood planning. First, while significant attention has been paid to varying scales of care (Power and Hall, 2018), more evidence is required to understand how individuals formulate policies and deliver care through enhanced public participation. A fundamental gap exists in understanding lines of responsibility between politicians, public servants and citizens. Public servants are required to answer to both politicians and the public, and in the absence of strategic planning, they develop processes that are bespoke and hyper-localised.

Further research is needed on operationalising participatory, place-based policies. Looking at the effects that negotiations within the black box have on the relationships between public servants and the communities they work on behalf of is beyond the scope of this paper but is important to consider. Furthermore, longitudinal studies across diverse socio-political contexts would be beneficial. Finally, there is the wider question of how communities are constituted in participatory processes and who is included and excluded from decision-making.

This study highlights that decentralised care policy strategies need to be tailored to specific institutional contexts and advocate for a privileged responsibility to permeate through organisational structures. We have shown that an ethics of care perspective is an indispensable first step towards a civic service that sees itself as

capable of putting citizen participation into practice. We believe it is important to consider these experiences and clarify the consequences.

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