

A sociological analysis of the impact of the public sector on public participation : the case of healthcare domain

Alexandre Fauquette, Phd Candidate, The Lille Center For European Research on Administration, Politics and Society (CERAPS, CNRS, University Lille 2), directed by Professor J-G. Contamin

Participation has been a feature of the political agendas of many governments in recent decades, and the domain of healthcare has not been indifferent to its appeal. But although there are a lot of studies on public participation or participatory democracy in sociological literature, these studies do not really question the impacts of the public sector and what it means for the way public participation works »? This is the question asked by the study: what is the impact of healthcare domain on public participation? What does it mean to encourage lay people to participate in a public domain which is dominated by a high level of knowledge? What effects does it have on medical power?

Social and political context:

- More and more national and local authorities are introducing public involvement as an important value of their health policies. For instance, public involvement is one of the most important priorities of the United Kingdom's healthcare system.
- The multiplication health crises has forced political institution to strengthen the transparency of health-care system.
- Public participation is seen as a means of reducing the gap between patients and health practitioners. It's presented as the end of paternalism in medicine.

What is the impact of healthcare domain on public participation?

Main hypotheses:

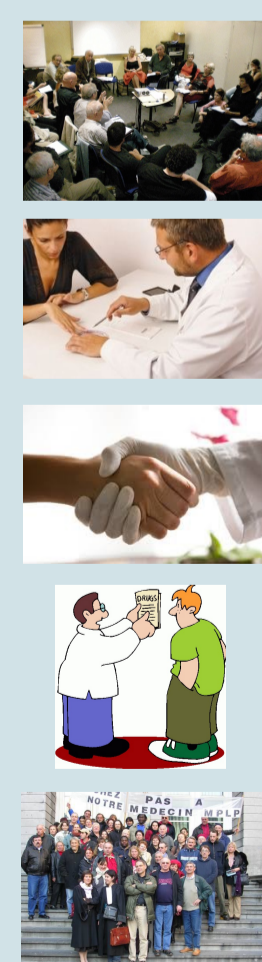
- The study of the impact of the public sector on public participation is a way of discovering others meanings of public participation and other practices.
- The specificities of the health care domain (the importance of scientific expertise and medical and confidentiality, triangular relations between professionals, political officials and patients) have some effects on public participation. Mostly due to differences in medical or policy issues.

Methods:

- A systematic review of the literature on participation in healthcare and in other domain.
- Semi-structured interviews with many involved in the field (health professionals, patients and citizens, political actors).
- Participant observations in medical and political institutions, and social movements in France and Belgium.

Primary effects on the meaning of participation.

- Sometimes, the meaning of participation in healthcare is the same that used in participatory democracy research. Participation is quickly linked with participative democracy and its procedures.
- But, participation is often understood as a greater patient involvement in health care delivery through consultations. Often, shared decision making does not concern political decisions but medical decisions.
- For many authors and people involved in the field, participation is considered more as a collaborative interaction between health professionals and patients, a new healthcare works.
- The meaning of public participation differs according to many factors (biographical data, social context, etc.). Sometimes, public participation procedures are not meant to inspire debate, but instead to force people to have better behaviors and to be more concerned about their own health.
- Sometimes, participation means doing volunteer work on health projects, or participating with healthcare professionals in political movements. In Belgium, some citizens are active in social and political movements for better healthcare,



Main impacts on the design of participation.

- Contrary to other domains, healthcare professionals can organize and control participatory processes. For instance, they can hold seminars and conferences that cover medical and socio-psychological questions.
- Contrary to other domains, there are triangular relations between professionals, political officials and patients.
- A variety of activities exist that are not considered to be public participation in other domains or in literature on participatory democracy, but which are considered as participation in healthcare domain (exercise, cooking workshops, etc.).
- It's a way of engaging participation without answering any medical or political questions.



Main effects on medical power.

- Public participation is considered as a challenge to the paternalistic attitudes which dominate the healthcare system. (As we can see in this image, patient and health professional may be on an equal footing).
- Sometimes, participation can be considered as a means of reinforcing healthcare professionals' paternalist power. Contrary to widespread belief, it's not always the patient but often the health professional who is at the center of the decision. Health professional is also at the center of the participatory processes (as we can see from this image).
- But their power can also be counteracted by political institutions... (This photograph shows Regional Agencies for Healthcare which is a state institution for healthcare in France).
- And some patients' attitudes. Patients can be on an equal footing with health professionals (as we can see in this photograph). It depends on a lot of factors (education, social and medical circumstances of the person concerned, self-confidence, etc.).



Scientific interest: The question of the impact of the public sector on public participation has a heuristic interest in so far as:

- It allows us to understand that public participation is not just the same thing as participatory democracy.
- It may open up new horizons for the study of public participation.