

Introduction: Ironists, reformers, or rebels?

Reflections on the role of the social sciences in the process of science policy making

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Introduction

Public engagement has become increasingly important within the sphere of science policy making.¹ A broad range of discursive experiments and participatory methods involving citizens, consumers, and other key stakeholders are frequently used to consult the public about their opinion of new developments in science and technology. This special issue of *STI-Studies* aims at addressing the role(s) of scholars in this important field. Having personally participated in a variety of public engagement exercises and public discourse experiments, and having carefully considered how we (as social scientists) fit within these exercises, we have come to realise that our roles are heterogeneous, complex and ambiguous.

Social scientists complete a number of tasks in participatory science policy making: For example, they initiate public and/or stake holder discourses by adopting or even developing participatory and discursive methods. They organise and moderate various dialogues (for the case of Germany see e.g. Renn 1999). They oversee various public discourse events and evaluate the process (for the case of Switzerland see e.g. Gisler 2000-2003). They analyse and comment on the impact of participatory methods, drawing on sociological and political theories (e.g. Maasen/Merz, 2006).

In brief, social scientists play a variety of *formal* roles, serving as organisers, moderators, evaluators, commentators and others. However, these formal descriptions are rigid and do not fully convey the underlying social, moral and political dimensions of these roles. Furthermore, there is some ambivalence between the formal functions and the socio-moral-political roles taken on by social scientists. This ambivalence arises due to a conflict between the 'form and content' of these roles as well as the fact that multiple roles may coincide with each other. For a better understanding of the ongoing debate on participatory science policy making, it is necessary to reflect upon this ambivalence because it affects social scientists' accomplishments in this important field.

Our contribution to the recent debate is a kind of self-reflexive turn: We would like to carefully consider the role of the social sciences and the role(s) social scientists

¹ In the following we summarise this as "participatory science policy making", although we recognise that there may be important differences in the concrete historical, social, as well political contexts of policy making between science, technology, and medicine (see also Schicktanz 2007).

expect and are *expected* to play in the field of participatory science policy making. Therefore, in this introduction, we raise the following questions from a theoretical point of view: How do the social sciences influence participatory policy procedures? What kind of explicit and/or implicit role(s) do social scientists play in the construction of political procedures and public debates?

In an effort to address these questions, we will, first, argue how participatory policy making is linked to the social sciences and its methodologies (chapter 1).

Second, we will contextualize the development of participatory policy making within the methodological framework of the social sciences and the broader historical shift towards the democratization of society (chapter 2).

Third, we will assess some of the roles social scientists have come to play in participatory policy making. We suggest a way of rethinking such roles by unmasking their often rather implicit social, political and moral premises and by critically reflecting on the idea that there is only a 'formal' role played by the social sciences. This way of rethinking is inspired by an analysis of social constructionism, as described by the Canadian philosopher Ian Hacking (1999). We will highlight some of the complexities and moralities linked to the concrete roles the social sciences play, especially in the sphere of science and politics. This will be discussed in more detail in the case studies and articles assembled in this issue (chapter 3).

Fourth, and finally, we would like to consider some 'looping effects' that the deconstruction of social scientific roles may have on participatory policy making on a more general level (chapter 4).

The social sciences, as a collection of disciplines, could eventually contribute more to participatory policy making by reflecting on its current role(s) and by revising the methods that are applied to specific scientific fields. In doing so, the social sciences may gain considerable insight into how they function as a thought collective.²

² We would like to thank the Swiss Science, Technology and Society Association (STS-CH), and the Swiss Academy of the Social Sciences and Humanities (SAGW) for funding the workshop "Ironists, reformers, rebels? The role of the social sciences in biomedical policy making", which took place at the Collegium Helveticum, Uni/ETH Zurich on 26-27 June 2008. Furthermore, we would like to thank Mark Schweda and Johannes Weyer for their instructive comments on this manuscript and R. Alexander Hamilton for his native language support.

1 Tracing the evolution of participatory policy making in the social sciences: Methods and methodologies

It would be a mistake to overlook how the social sciences have influenced (and continue to influence) methodological knowledge and organizational skills that are commonly used in participatory processes. The organization of round tables, citizens' votes, consensus conferences, public forums, etc. were all largely developed within the social sciences and continue to provide the methodological tools by which current participatory processes are drafted (cf. Joss/Durant 1995, Beckmann/Keck 1999, Abelson et al. 2001; for an overview see: Felt et al. 2003). In general, there is a fine line between descriptive social science methods, such as surveys, opinion polls, and interviews, and interventionist and interactive participatory methods, such as group discussions or consensus conferences. However, in the field of science and technology studies, they can each be understood as an opportunity to investigate and to improve the relationship between science and society (Bauer et al. 2007).

For example, online-enquiry techniques strongly resemble quantitative survey traditions, yet they offer the possibility to post concerns on the internet while experts may respond to them and provide critical feedback (cf. Felt et al. 2003: 53). *PubliFocus*, a participatory method commonly used in Switzerland,³ is based on group discussion methodology. Focus groups and group discussion methodologies, however, face similar problems, be they applied in a democratic participation exercise or a qualitative research project: As constructed exchanges of arguments and views, with debates organised by one or more people, they rely heavily on the capabilities of an interventionist, an over-cautious or, hopefully, a discerning and well-balanced moderator.

³ For more information see: <www.ta-swiss.ch/e/doku_buer.html>, accessed 20.7.09.

Moreover, some methodological techniques (e.g. the *Public Debates* carried out in the Netherlands) combine qualitative and quantitative elements, encouraging in-depth discussion and political reflection. They also seek to map a representative picture of public opinion (cf. Felt et al. 2003: 52).

However, each of these methods defines in some way what 'the public' means and how the public is allowed to act. As Pohl (2004) has shown such methodological premises about the public, furthermore, influence the role of social scientists and the social sciences as well. Lezaun and Soneryd (2007) highlight the often static images of the public produced through specific methods selected by organizers of public engagement exercises. The authors show that these images are sustained from a governance perspective by a wish for a malleable public, whose opinions and views can be changed through education or policies.

It is also important to note that many of the procedures are time-consuming and cost-intensive and thus depend on how and by whom they are implemented. Moreover, as with research results, the reports often reach only a small audience and only rarely attract the attention of expert consultants and other actors from the broader political arena. And, as Abels argues in this issue, the outcome of these procedures can be difficult to measure.

Of course, participatory methods are only one part of science policy making and have often been criticised (cf. Chilvers 2008). Science policy making often continues to be dominated by expert opinion, although, this certainly varies according cultural and national characteristics. Biotechnology, stem cell research, organ transplantation, and human cloning are, for instance, topics that tend to be negotiated by expert committees, which appear as established tools used in the governance of the life sciences in most countries. Consulting the public about biomedical policy making or social health care issues

continues to be the exception rather than the rule.

Interestingly, social scientists are infrequently asked to sit on expert committees or advisory boards dealing with diverse aspects of biotechnology or biomedical assessment.⁴ In other words, with just a few exceptions,⁵ social scientists are rarely considered 'experts' on the various aspects of science and technology.⁶ Although an important topic, the notion of social expertise, and the power struggle between different kinds of knowledge, is beyond the scope of this paper.⁷ Instead, we wish to focus on the heterogeneous roles of social scientists in the science policy process. How does this process depend on social scientists' self-understanding, and how does this self-understanding explain the fact that many social scientists are more interested in public engagement than their own active engagement?

⁴ See for an analysis of involved experts and lay-people in policy making in the medical context for Germany (Schicktanz 2008). For Switzerland Maasen and Merz (2006) have shown the predominance of natural-sciences issues in assessments by TA-Swiss, the "Swiss Technology Assessment Agency", and concluded that this trend leads to the neglect of the social scientific perspective.

⁵ Bogner (2009) refers in his study of German ethics councils to the requirement for heterogeneous knowledge competence, where expertise from the natural sciences and medicine is listed first. However, his analysis also reveals the crucial role of lawyers who seem to contribute a kind of base-line principles guiding the process. (We would like to thank Alex Bogner here for forwarding us a preprint version of his article).

⁶ 'Biotechnology and Medicine' is one of the six key areas TA-Swiss is consulting on. An evaluation of the eleven biomedicine-related studies and public participation procedures organized by TA-Swiss since the year 2000, produced the following result: 64% of the advisory board members had a background in a medical profession or in the sciences, while 10% of the members came from the social sciences and the humanities (<www.ta-swiss.ch/d/arch_biot.html>, accessed 20.7.2009).

⁷ See Kelly (2003) for a critique of bioethics commissions and the lack of societal competence.

2 Contextualizing the different roles of social scientists in the policy process

One plausible answer to this question is the recognition of the so-called "participatory turn" in the social sciences, which describes the inclusion of various social actors (such as citizens, NGOs, or other stakeholders) in technological and biomedical policy making (Jasanoff 2003). Jasanoff interprets the pursuit of a democratic representation of views in political processes under this umbrella term. Furthermore, Helga Nowotny, Peter Scott and Michael Gibbons in their book "Re-Thinking Science" (2001) identify a normative approach embodied in their notion of the *agora* in a 'mode-2-society'. From their perspective, science has been forced to meet the public which led the public to "speak back to science" (ibid.: 247). In this light, we can distinguish public participation exercises as forums for such encounters – between 'the public' and (natural/medical) sciences – to occur.

Developments in science and technology have motivated a range of European and North American countries to introduce novel ways of consulting their citizens; seeking to include them in the political decision making process. Although an array of methodologies have been developed and employed towards this end, one can observe a broad shift from quantitative surveys in the 1980s towards increasingly qualitative approaches (cf. Joss/Bellucci 2002: 140pp, Bauer et al. 2007). Without wanting to dwell on the point too much, it could thus be stated that the encounter with scientists has been organized via social scientific methods.

Yet, it is certainly important to remember that efforts to integrate various publics into science and technology decision processes reflect a more general societal trend; one that is not unique to science policy and the social study of science. As Jürgen Gerhards (2001) illustrates, the trend towards public participation can be traced back to the economic prosperity following the end of the Second World

War. This period of economic development was accompanied by an expansion of social realms and endeavours; facilitated by improved education systems in the Western world, which resulted in a greater number of educated people who were able to articulate their individual points of view. At the same time, worrying technoscientific developments led to increased scepticism towards academic, and especially scientific expertise (cf. Habermas 1969, Irwin/ Wynne 1996), contributing to the rise of new social movements: Environmental activists fought against air pollution and experts' definitions of risk, patients' groups demanded new or altered treatments and alternative medicine, communities rallied for the establishment of parks instead of shopping malls, and so on. This kind of *participatory turn in society*, sometimes described as 'grassroots movements', highlighted a growing demand for science and technology assessments that reflected social values and moral norms.

Therefore, the participatory turn was not unique to the social sciences; rather it was a general trend undergone by modern, democratic, liberal societies. Moreover, the active engagement of the public, especially concerning medical science and health care policy, is still a recent development. Consequently, politicians and natural scientists, as well as some social scientists, remain sceptical in this respect (like in Germany, cf. Schicktanz 2007).

The overall trend of participatory interventions may have been coined by structural changes and motivated by democratic and political thought, as Gerhards argues. However, it also corresponds with seeing and understanding the world according to *social constructionist theory*. Work in this area suggests that many questions, such as which diseases should be investigated and treated, what counts as a disease and what are the underlying bioethical and social norms and values that have to be considered, can no longer be answered by mere scientific facts and (natural scientific) experts' knowledge. The

treatment of these issues as urging consensus, rather points towards an epistemological and normative constructionist understanding of research in science, technology and medicine.

Thus, the participatory turn challenges established actors and dominant voices in the public sphere – including leaders of political parties and representatives of pharmaceutical companies – and demands a kind of interaction that avoids privileging a certain core episteme. However, despite the goal of increasing democratic participation concerning science and technology, STS-authors such as Kerr et al. (2007) have pointed to a range of problematic issues arising from these exercises. A result of their study on public events about the new genetics, showed the colonization of lay positions by expert speakers. The authors called for stronger reflection on expertise consequentially.

Thus, a certain risk of one-sided influence of the participants (e.g. by organisers, funding agencies, or moderators, etc.) remains with these procedures. The risk stretches out to the social scientists involved in the process, be they organisers, evaluators, moderators or members of an involved stakeholder group. It also leads us to ask more precisely how public dialogue is designed and which roles are foreseen for the actors involved.

3 The construction of what?

The idea of a social construction of reality, departing from Peter Berger's and Thomas Luckmann's (1967) famous treatise, offers insight into the "intersubjective 'constitution' of social phenomena" (Coulter 2001: 83). This approach is linked to the belief that social processes, problems, and situations have been socially constructed (i.e. based upon implicit ideas and reinforced by social interaction). Since the introduction of this concept, many social scientists have analysed how society is built upon social and cultural practices and have strived at disentangling social worlds and showing how

society is constructed (see for example Beck, 2001).

In his book "The social construction of what?" Ian Hacking argues that social constructivist theory takes a critical stance towards the status quo, such as "[...] X as it is at the present, is not determined by the nature of things; it is not inevitable" (1999: 6) (where 'X' stands for objects, ideas, practices, classifications, etc.). Furthermore, social constructionists implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, draw conclusions such as C₁ "X is quite bad as it is" and C₂ "We would be much better off if X were done away with or at least radically transformed" (ibid.). Of course, not everybody draws conclusions like C₁ and C₂. Hacking observes, however, a variety of similar but not identical engagements in undoing assumptions about social worlds.

Protagonists in the sociology of science used constructionist ideas to analyse science and technology matters (i.e. Knorr-Cetina, 1981, Latour/Woolgar, 1986). For many years, constructionist thinking has been applied to developments in science and technology that are publicly questioned and negotiated in the political arena. Natural occurrences, as well as technically coined social problems, such as acid rain, environmental pollution, nuclear waste, increases in allergies and eczemas, the spread of infectious diseases, etc. have been evaluated for their social constructedness.

Public participation exercises have built upon these efforts and have begun to reach social consensus over the handling of such matters. The construction and design of the very same procedures, however, are rarely questioned with respect to their disciplinary or functional make-up or the capacities or capabilities involved in their design.

3.1 Social constructionism

In the social study of science, technology and medicine, the aim has been to deconstruct phenomena that have become taken for granted and regarded

as inevitable and to understand them as contingent and transformable. For example there were diseases whose existence had long been questioned by society, such as 'sick building syndrome'. A meticulous historical study, such as the one performed by Michelle Murphy (2006), was required before this reality could be understood and appreciated.

Of course, there is considerable controversy as to how far it is possible to go with constructivist claims. Indeed, this epistemic debate divides many social scientists from philosophers to natural scientists. We share Ian Hacking's view that the threat of universal constructionism or absolute relativism does not point to the core of what social constructionism is all about (cf. Hacking 1999: 4). We are more interested in how this work is accompanied by a demand for co-determination in decisions concerning knowledge production and application.

According to Hacking, the first question one should ask regarding social construction is, *what* is or can be interpreted as socially constructed? From a kind of political-philosophical stance, Hacking points out that something often is identified as being socially constructed when there is an urge from some actors to raise awareness that this construction is *not* self-evident, natural, and ineluctable (ibid.: 6). Therefore, for such actors the concept of social constructionism seems liberating, as it allows them to question the function, self-evidence, and neutrality of something.

Considering social constructionism in relation to the role(s) of social scientists in science policy making gives rise to various thoughts: Perhaps the most interesting part of the constructivist undertaking is, first, the epistemological insight that the enforcement of a certain way to do or see the world is not a given and thus cannot be generally enacted by a certain form of behaviour or validated by a certain 'truth'. The constructivist approach helps to understand how social phenomena come into existence, how they are made self-evident

and how they are necessarily linked to processes of social exclusion and inclusion, resulting in social closure.

In addition to this epistemological dimension, there is a self-reflexive dimension linked to social constructionism, which enables us to evaluate the social, historical, and economic pathways and routes something has taken in order to become what it is taken to be. In other words, although something is framed in a certain way, and taken to mean a certain thing, its existence contains social, political and also moral contingencies and it is open to change.

Ian Hacking has clearly analysed these two dimensions of social constructionist theory. According to Hacking, by identifying and criticising the social construction of 'X' (where 'X' could mean sex, gender, age, race, disease, etc.) scholars, or 'social constructionists' assume they have the opportunity to change the manner in which society conceives of something and thus influence social behaviour. This becomes obvious when one takes a moment to reflect upon Hacking's work on one of the most influential social constructionist doctrines of our time: *gender*. Discussing various feminist theorists, he shows how the perspectives and priorities of these scholars differ substantially from one another (Hacking 1999: 7ff). While some feminists simply want to deconstruct biological or psychological differences between men and women and to show that gender attitudes are not inevitable, other feminists go beyond this form of analysis: They want to unmask an ideology as intrinsically male. Furthermore, social construction work often tries to reform or even rebel against social reality or conditions of injustice. When Ian Hacking demands more precision in considering social constructions, he thus differentiates between various *levels* of engagement in the work of social constructionists. Specifically, he identifies six grades of commitment, including:

1. very weak 'historical' considerations concerning the development of 'X', on one end of the spectrum,

2. an 'ironic' approach, followed by
3. a 'reformist' approach,
4. an 'unmasking' approach,
5. a 'rebellious' approach and, finally,
6. a 'revolutionary' approach on the other end of the spectrum (cf. Hacking 1999: 19ff).

The least demanding form of social constructionist analysis is the historical approach because this research does not attempt to assess 'X' as good or bad. Next, ironists hold an ironic attitude towards the notion that the world could have been quite different in the past; contingent upon a certain time and place, and yet tend to accept this irony and seem to leave the world (or 'X') unchanged. Reformers and unmaskers go a step further. But while reformers concentrate on evaluating the deconstructed 'X' as bad, unmaskers criticise the theoretical function from which it will lose its practical efficacy. Rebels go well beyond the point of unmasking. Scholars subscribing to this approach criticise the idea of 'X' vehemently. Finally, activists, who seek to move beyond the world of ideas and try to change socio-material realities, are revolutionaries.

These six approaches differ in their belief in the consequences of deconstruction: Ranging from making intellectual comments to actively transforming social practises. Of course, these roles are socio-political-moral roles and are played out quite differently depending on the intellectual radicalism and moral priorities of individual scholars.

3.2 Formal roles and social roles

Social scientists classify social realities in a range of ways and aim at showing how they are constructed. Accordingly, the critical question for us is: How do the socio-political-moral roles (cf. chapter 3.1) intersect with the formal roles of social scientists engaged in participatory policy making (cf. introduction)?

It is precisely the notion of different forms of engagement – different 'roles' as we label them – that is of interest

in this issue. If we try to identify the heterogeneous range of possible roles, we find for example, social scientists serving as (a) designers of public consultation exercises, e.g. through their development of various methodologies. Sometimes they act as (b) organisers. They are installed as (c) moderators. They frequently serve as (d) evaluators. As (e) commentators, they analyse and criticise public debates on scientific and medical developments (e.g. regarding the over- or undersupply of participatory events). Finally, social scientists sometimes (f) take part in expert committees and/or engage in policy work.

Each of these roles implies different perspectives and priorities. Moreover, the duties and roles of social scientists are sometimes blurred – in their own perception but also in the external perception of the general public – and sometimes they collapse.

The *formal roles* exemplified above now can be revisited in face of the socio-moral-political roles, described in chapter 3.1.

In the following, we will push Hacking's scheme and ask, in more explorative terms, how these roles may be employed. Hence, our aim is not to define ideal roles in a normative sense, but to elaborate and test the various positions a scholar might occupy in participatory policy making processes.

(1) *The historian*

She describes the historical development of the public's role in science policy making but does not offer her personal opinion as to whether the present (or former) situation is (or was) good or bad. The *historian* appears relatively detached from recent events and engagements. Of course, one could ask about her normative position or stance. But, if we consider her role closely, the historian is not interested in being a commentator, a moderator, or even an organiser of any participatory exercise and, therefore, she might be criticised for taking a 'neutral' position, when a neutral position is not possible.

(2) *The ironist*

She is a powerful intellectual who analyses how the public is (or is not) involved in science policy making. Thus, an ironist might personally believe that more participation would be desirable. However, because of her intellectual scepticism towards policy processes and governance structures, she does not believe that her comments would alter the status quo. We might encounter an ironist approach in situations where scholars analyse and comment on public engagement in science policy, but reduce their analysis to descriptive comments, far removed from political and normative approaches. Thus, she neither favours a specific discourse nor a socially interactive approach.

(3) *The reformer*

A reformer is someone who believes she can change the situation by analysing the relationship between methods and outcomes in public engagement. Therefore, she tries to reflect upon hidden restrictions and may consider ways to optimise current methods. The reformer may be an active moderator or developer of participatory methods, but she still accepts the existing framework, including its ideas, structures, and practices.

(4) *The unmasker*

She takes a clear normative stance towards public engagement, including: how much public engagement is desirable. She tries to unmask ideologies, which she believes underpin different methods of public engagement. For example, as an evaluator, she criticises methods which in her opinion are dominated by a specific ideology. The unmasking approach can be a helpful part of new methodological developments because it attempts to overcome perceived shortcomings (cf. Davies, 2006).

(5) *The rebel*

She deconstructs present forms of public engagement and tries to develop

new methods for improving the relationship between science and society. The rebel strongly believes that the public should be engaged more often and in different ways than the present. The rebellious approach can be associated with the development of new engagement methods, where, for example, present forms of hierarchy (e.g. between lay-people and experts) are explicitly criticised. This includes active engagement in participatory science policy making. However, the aim is rather to maintain established scientific criteria, which is not the case for revolutionists.

(6) *The revolutionist*

She is actively engaged in science policy itself and seeks to change current participatory practices. The revolutionist contributes to blurring specific roles because of her critical stance towards predominant notions of science and society. Thus, she might simultaneously act as a scholar, an active organiser, or a designer of public engagement practices.

Even though the description of these roles is an analytic construct, roles and their understandings are 'real' insofar as they generate institutions (such as public engagement organisations, assessment methods and reports). Furthermore, reflecting on these roles may allow us to detect unwarranted ambivalences and ambiguities that may arise in their application. The contributions presented in this volume allow us to probe some of the reflections on these roles.

3.3 Making and un-making social sciences: contributions to this volume

The making and un-making of the roles of social sciences and social scientists in participatory policy making was the subject of a workshop, held 26-27 June 2008 at the Collegium Helveticum, UZH/ETH Zurich.⁸ Participants from different disciplinary backgrounds in

Science and Technology Studies (STS), including the history of science, the political and social sciences, bioethics, public participation practise, environmental studies, and technology assessment, discussed the different epistemological, methodological, political and normative aspects of social scientists' roles in science policy making and public participation. The wide range of international participants attending this event provided an occasion to analyse individual experiences and local case studies. The three contributions in this volume provide a selection hinting at the discussions explored during the workshop on the role of the social sciences in the field of participatory policy making.

In her contribution "*Observer, translator or participant: What is the role of social scientists in different pTA models?*", Gabriele Abels proposes a typology of seven different procedures based upon their function and the ways participation is achieved. Her discussion reveals the non-triviality of expanding from organisational structures to rethinking the roles of the social scientists involved. She concludes that social scientists mainly inhabit three roles in pTA. While their acting as 'observers' seems more traditional, Abels adds the function of 'translator', which yet awaits its application. The reformist potential of this role seems clear, yet the very idea of it becoming realized or 'formalized' as we may say, may serve to push the 'unmasking' effect of the social sciences aspirations.

She, then, focuses on participants engaged in participatory technology assessment, including experts *and* lay-people. She argues that social scientists could gain influence in participatory policy by acting as 'experts' rather than as organisers or moderators'. Abels suggests accordingly that social scientists engaged as expert participants may gain more scientific authority than by performing managerial tasks.

In his contribution "*A helping hand or a servant discipline? Interpreting*

⁸ For a commentary on the workshop see Jung (2009).

non-academic perspectives on the roles of social science in participatory policy-making" Kevin Burchell asks if social scientists take part in participatory technology assessments as academics or as practitioners. Do they merely serve as a helping hand? While Abel critically discusses the various forms of public engagement and focuses on social scientists' potential as translators, Burchell stresses the importance of social scientists' active involvement in bringing about social change. In his contribution, he discusses how practitioners (i.e. non-academic actors) conceive of academics within the participatory sphere, and studies their expectations for the social sciences. In this context, Burchell observes that social science is often thought of in utilitarian terms (i.e. it lends a 'helping hand'). Hence, social science is credited for its problem-solving capacity and is attributed a *historian* or *ironic* status.

Crucially, according to Burchell, academic social scientists do not see themselves as mere 'problem-solvers', rather they identify careful critique and analysis as their most important contributions to the field. While practitioners are willing to change participatory exercises from within, academics favour political mechanisms, trying to maintain an independent scholarly stance. Hence, academic social scientists often attempt to live up to an ideal, serving as *unmaskers* in the sphere of political analysis. However, practitioners' perception threatens to neglect social scientific knowledge, dismissing academic insights as too detached.

With Burchell we learn that the gap between a self-defined role as *unmasker* and the external expectations as *rebel* or even *revolutionary*, which both groups experience, can be used more productively by fostering stronger commitments towards each other, instead of obfuscating the differences.

The third article in this volume discusses the question, how social scientific methods are linked to the ways in which social scientists contribute to

public participation. Maud Radstake and her colleagues focus on the construction of 'the public' and the manner in which social scientists interact with it through the use of certain methodological tools.

Consciously, they began to experiment with the roles social scientists can play through an online discussion forum that served as a site for public dialogue on genomics-related issues. They observed that moderators, who oversee such forums, cannot only integrate lay-people, but may also help guide and direct the participation of experts. Radstake et al. discuss from their own experience, the diverse roles played by social scientists and their relationship with other experts (including scholars in the life sciences). Experts often serve as informants and thus manage to keep lay-people aligned with their own understanding of facts; thus, they may range from *historian* to *ironist*, or even *reformer*, if they are determined to convince participants of a certain argument.

Reflecting on an exercise they are intimately involved in, the authors seek to develop an alternative way of conducting 'public engagement with science'. By focusing less on 'the public' and 'lay-people' and more on the roles of experts and organisers, they address the engagement of social scientists in participatory exercises from an unconventional perspective. They argue that it is necessary to merge the role of the organiser/moderator, which in their case is one and the same, with the role of the social scientist and thus point inadvertently to the gap between the formal role and the implicit tasks set by a certain disciplinary background. As they describe, the social scientist, as a researcher, is expected to be critical; the practitioner is expected to be practical. In order to describe the catalysts and resistances to successful dialogue, they define the "interventionist dialogue researcher". Thus, blurring these roles may provide clearer insight into the goals of participatory exercises. Rather than bringing a range of hetero-

geneous actors into fruitful dialogue – as it may still do – it becomes clear that the exercise itself becomes a political forum, while it continues to provide a place for further reflection. This approach alters the neutral position of the social scientist because it takes place in a political arena with ‘real world’ consequences. The contribution takes us back to Ian Hacking by making it very clear that taking any scientific stance already means intervening.

4 Outlook: Is there a ‘looping effect’?

This introduction started off with a central premise testing the gap between the formal roles offered to social scientists in participatory policy making and the socio-political-moral dimensions inherent in adopting and expanding on these roles. The aim of this volume is a critical reappraisal of the attribution of certain (contingent) roles to social scientists by various disciplinary branches, policy makers and also social scientists themselves, and the ways these roles are performed and played out in the public sphere. By identifying this contentious territory, we open the door to a range of questions; even if we cannot claim to have all the answers, we still hope to take the debate a step further.

The papers presented in this volume illustrate exemplarily that there are a range of ambivalences and ambiguities incumbent in the official tasks and the expectations raised by those interested and involved in political processes, as well as those developing and performing them. These ambivalences, though, could be seen as a challenge for the future relationship between (social) sciences and society: On the one hand, the social sciences present an opportunity – like no other discipline – to address and articulate public concerns towards science and medicine. On the other hand, clarifying public expectations for the social sciences may increase their visibility and strengths.

The different contributions in our issue show that it makes sense to go be-

yond the formal roles often attributed to specific actors engaged in policy making and to consider, instead, the socio-moral and political roles they have come to hold. Andrew Stirling’s (2008) ‘opening-up’ approach to public engagement focuses on the many decisive moments in political processes before decisions are taken. He encourages scholars to “foster more discriminating attention to the conditions and perspectives bearing on appraisal and commitment” (2008: 284). He may be read as a reminder that it can be quite worthwhile to reflect upon the make-up of roles and their performative achievements when we assess the social sciences in participatory policy making. Hacking advises us to carefully reconsider the issues at play and to reflect upon how these problems, concepts, models, etc. are approached in an interdisciplinary and also inter-practical way.

Participatory policy making, like other forms of policy making, relies on conflicting accounts of social reality. Hacking was adamant in pronouncing the importance of being clear about the products of these constructions. His classification may help us understand those involved in contributing to them. However, it remains within our intellectual faculty to reflect upon possible looping effects. This means that ‘even’ scholars analysing participatory events, methods or scientific reports are not particularly neutral but take a stance – a socio-moral-political role – in science policy making. A “causal understanding, if known by those who are understood” (Hacking 1995: 351) may be a conveyor of change. The conceptualization of additional formalized roles, as Gabriele Abels points out, the reconfiguration of new ways of collaboration between social scientific academics and practitioners, as ascertained by Kevin Burchell, the re-thinking of notions of self-understandings, as demonstrated by Maud Radstake and colleagues, are exemplary contributions hinting at what could be possible in this respect.

5 References

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