Co-Creation Domesticated: How Municipality Employees Recontextualize and Operationalize Principles of Co-Creation in the Pursuit of Green Transition

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ANDERS HORSBØL

Aalborg University

horsboel@hum.aau.dk

Abstract

Notions of co-creation and co-production have recently gained importance within several governance areas, suggesting new relations between public authorities and citizens. However, whereas the overall principles of co-creation are relatively well established, the ways in which these principles are realized (or not) in specific fields of practices remain to be studied. This does not at least apply to initiatives towards green transition and climate change mitigation, to which this article is devoted. The current article presents a case study of a 3-year long green transition project, based on a co-operation between four municipalities or municipality associated actors in Denmark and Sweden. The case provides an opportunity to study how ideas and principles of co-creation as a general policy paradigm are domesticated when they meet the local experiences of a municipality initiated green transition project. To put the study of domestication at work in a discourse approach, the notions of recontextualization and operationalization are employed (Fairclough 2005). Empirically, the article analyzes representations of the co-creation process made by municipality employees, who met in a series of workshops in order to exchange experiences and develop a common framework.

Key words: co-creation, domestication, recontextualization, operationalization, green transition

1. Introduction

Notions of co-creation and co-production have recently gained importance within several governance areas. The notions suggest new relations between public authorities and citizens, characterized by a wider inclusion of participants and different forms of knowledge and by a shared responsibility for providing public services or solving common problems (Voorberg et al. 2015; Torfing et al. 2016). However, whereas the overall principles of co-creation are relatively well established, the ways in which these principles are realized (or not) in specific fields of practices remain to be studied. This does not at least apply to initiatives towards green transition and climate change mitigation, to which this article is devoted. To this purpose, discourse studies offer a productive path to investigate how co-creation is negotiated and made sense of in concrete practices.

The current article presents a case study of a 3-year long green transition project, based on a co-operation between four municipalities or municipality associated actors in Denmark and Sweden. At the outset of the project, each partner identified different local environmental goals such as reduction of electricity consumption, replacement of oil-fired boilers, higher distribution of electric cars, and installation of solar panels. These goals all affect private decisions of individual citizens or families, where the municipality has no legislative competence. That is, for the environmental ambitions to be realized, the voluntary participation and co-operation of citizens and possibly others was crucial. In that context, co-creation was seen by the municipality partners as a promising path.

During the 3 years, the local partners met regularly in a series of workshops in order to exchange experiences and develop a common framework for a so called 'co-creational green transition'. The framework was 'tested' in the different local contexts, and these experiences where subsequently reported and discussed at the common workshops. Researchers from two universities also took part in the project, among these the current author.

This article will focus on the interplay between the general principles of co-creation and the specific experiences of transforming those principles to local instances of green transition. Thus, the case provides an opportunity to study how ideas and principles of co-creation as a general policy paradigm are *domesticated* in a municipality initiated green transition project. Domestication implies that the ideas of co-creation are not simply applied or transported from one area to another, but are renegotiated and made sense of in a new environment (Silverstone et al. 1992).

To put the study of domestication at work in a discourse approach, the notions of *recontextualization* and *operationalization* will be employed (Fairclough 2005). Recontextualization draws attention to the ways in which discourse travels and is modified in new situations, whereas operationalization focuses on the way in which discourse is enacted by ways of acting and interacting as well as inculcated by ways of being. The article will thus analyze how the general principles of co-creation are recontextualized as the municipality participants represent their local experiences with co-creation. And, simultaneously, the article will analyze how the municipality participants represent their (inter)actions and professional identities when sharing their local co-creation experiences.

The article will be structured as follows: after a short theoretical account in section 2, defining the notion of co-creation and relating it to the field of environmental communication, section 3 will briefly present the analytical framework and the data. The empirical analyses in section 4 will constitute the bulk of the article, followed by concluding remarks in section 5.

2. Co-Creation and Environmental Communication

In their review of the literature on co-creation and co-production, Voorberg et al. (2015: 1335) define co-creation as 'the active involvement of end-users in various stages of the production process'. Similarly, in another review, Verschuere et al. (2012a: 1083) define co-production as 'the involvement of

individual citizens and groups in public service delivery'. Indeed, co-creation and co-production are often used interchangeably and will be referred to in the present article simply as co-creation. Furthermore, the forms of co-creation are frequently differentiated in 3 types according to the degree of involvement. Thus, *co-implementer* refers to the lowest level of participation, where citizens only perform implementation tasks. In the next step, referred to as *co-designer*, the public organization has the initiative, but citizens take part in designing the public service delivery. Finally, *co-initiator* designates the highest level of citizen participation, where citizens initiate the process (Voorberg et al. 2015). This triad of involvement has basic similarities with Arnstein's famous ladder of participation (Arnstein 1969), except that none of the 3 terms are pejorative, as with 'manipulation' and 'tokenism' in Arnstein's vocabulary.

Several other attempts have been made to differentiate further between types of co-creation, often in the form of matrixes. Ulrich (2016) construes a matrix based on a) the degree of unpredictability and openness of the co-creation process and b) the central actors in the process, i.e. whether the driving forces are either public authorities or citizens, private businesses and civil society actors. Hoff and Gasset (2016) work with a similar axis with key actors, ranging from public authorities to citizens, whereas the second axis in the matrix is constituted by a distinction between the targeting of individual versus collective change.

In a wider theoretical context of policy and governance studies, the notion of co-creation has been associated with a paradigmatic shift from New Public Management to New Public Governance (Verschuere et al. 2012b). This implies a shift from understanding the relation between public sector and citizens as a market relation where the citizen is seen to a wide extent as a consumer, towards understanding the relationship as characterized by collaboration, exchange of resources and mutual responsibility. Within this broader framework, Torfing et al. (2016: 8) define co-creation in the public sector as a process

> through which two or more public and private actors attempt to solve a shared problem, challenge, or task through a constructive exchange of different kinds of knowledge, resources, competences, and ideas that enhance the production of public value in terms of visions, plans, policies, strategies, regulatory frameworks, or services, either through a continuous improvement of outputs or outcomes or through innovative step-changes that transform the understanding of the problem or task at hand and lead to new ways of solving it.

This definition implies a break with the previously mentioned differentiations of co-creation based on the level of citizen influence, in concordance with Arnstein's ladder of participation. Instead, the authors argue, with reference to the alleged complex and fragmented nature of modern societies, that the crucial point is mutual exchange of knowledge and resources. Therefore, there is a need of a new 'ladder of co-creation', focusing on the systematic engagement of relevant public and private actors (ibid.: 10). The suggested ladder of co-creation is thus a ladder of mutual collaboration rather than a ladder of citizen participation. Torfing et al. (ibid.: 11) describe five rungs of such a ladder, of which the most advanced include facilitation of 'collaborative

innovation based on joint agenda-setting and problem definition, joint design and testing of new and untried solutions, and coordinated implementation'.

The emphasis on mutual collaboration, including shared problem definition and problem solution, does indeed provide an opportunity to differentiate co-creation from citizen involvement, while acknowledging overlap and similarities. There is already a well-established scholarly literature on citizen involvement within science and environmental communication studies. In these studies, citizen involvement – like co-creation – is viewed as an alternative to 'traditional' or 'conventional' forms of communication between public authorities and citizens. Citizen involvement is thus seen as opposed to more monological campaign or information efforts, based on a 'knowledge deficit model', which has been criticized for reducing issues of science and environmental communication to a questions of transfer of knowledge from experts to citizens (Irwin 2006). Countering this model, the involvement of 'citizen voices' (Phillips et al. 2012) has been understood as a potential widening of democracy. However, critique has been raised in a range of studies as to the actual practice of citizen involvement, i.e. whether these practices would in fact meet the democratic claims of 'real' involvement (Kurath and Gisler 2009; Felt and Fochler 2010). Furthermore, more fundamental arguments on dialogical dilemmas inherent in citizen involvement, implying tensions between different dialogic or participatory concerns, have been part of the scholarly discussion (Delgado et al. 2011; Phillips 2011; Horsbøl et al. 2015). These studies have argued that it is naïve to assume that citizen involvement can eliminate power, but that reflexivity on the specific forms of power relations enacted in citizen involvement is important.

The studies on citizen involvement provide important insights of relevance also for studies of co-creation, not least on issues of power and dialogue. They call for caution towards new participatory buzzwords within the communication field, among which co-creation is a recent example. At the same time, it is important to note that co-creation cannot simply be diminished as putting old wine in new bottles. Although some kind of citizen involvement will presumably be implied in co-creation, the conceptual emphasis on mutual exchange of knowledge and shared responsibility for problem definition and solution points in a different direction. However – and this is yet another lesson to be learned from the studies of citizen involvement – the way in which the concept of co-creation is in fact taken up in attempts to practice co-creation is another question, which needs to be examined empirically. The next section will present the analytical approach for doing so in the current article.

3. Analytical Approach and Data

The idea of co-creation, as sketched out above, is rather general, and research is only beginning to explore how it is realized (or not) in practice (for recent Scandinavian examples, see Olesen et al. 2018 and Fogsgaard and de Jongh 2018). This article draws on the notion of domestication in order to study how ideas and principles of co-creation are realized in a municipality led green transition project. Referring originally to the agricultural use of wild animals,

domestication has been developed theoretically within media studies to raise questions about how media technologies are used, made sense of and integrated in the daily life of people in their homes (Silverstone et al. 1992; Haddon 2007) - and the concept has subsequently been further domesticated in other disciplines (Silverstone 2005). For the present case, domestication implies that the ideas of co-creation are not simply applied or transported from one area to another, but are renegotiated and made sense of in a new environment. Playing with the agricultural roots of the concepts, domestication thus invites a study of the way in which the wild animal of co-creation has been tamed within the field of municipality initiated green transition.

However, domestication is not a discourse studies concept. To put the study of domestication at work in a discourse approach, the notions of *recontextualization* and *operationalization* will be employed. Both notions have been suggested by Fairclough (2005) as examples of research fields for discourse analysis of organizational change. They have affinities with domestication as they refer to processes of transfer, involving reinterpretation and meaning making that cannot be reduced to one-to-one transmission of content. At the same time, recontextualization and operationalization have a more specific discourse analytic meaning that can guide empirical research.

Originating in the work of Bernstein (1990), recontextualization draws attention to the ways in which discourse travels and is modified in new situations. It can be studied at different levels of abstraction, either as the travel of discourse from one concrete situation to another within a thematically related course of events (Linell and Sarangi 1998; van Leeuwen 2009), or more abstract as the import of a discourse or genre into a field of practices, hitherto not affected by that discourse or genre (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999; Wodak and Fairclough 2010). Recontextualization may imply a colonization-appropriation dialectic in the sense that practice fields or organizations may be seen as colonized by external discourses, but at the same time actively appropriate them in ways which may lead to new outcomes (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999; Fairclough 2005). In the current case, co-creation as a policy notion across diverse fields is recontextualized within the specific field of green transition, and, simultaneously, the general principles of co-creation are recontextualized as the municipality participants make sense of local experiences with co-creation.

Operationalization designates the way in which discourse is *enacted* by ways of acting and interacting, *inculcated* by ways of being and realized *materially* (Fairclough 2005). The notion is motivated by the fact that discourses may circulate in organizations or practice fields, for instance in the form of strategy papers or mission statements on websites, without really effecting the everyday doings and practices. In contrast, the notion of operationalization aims to grasp this organizational impact by examining how discourses, in the sense of systems of representation, may be transformed into genres, in the sense of activities or procedures, or into communication styles, in the sense of performed identities. Finally, discourse may also be operationalized by being transformed into material objects, by ways of structuring space or by ways of employing (media) technologies. As indicated by Fairclough (2005: 934), recontextualization and operationalization are intertwined. Thus,

recontextualization takes place as discourse is enacted, inculcated and materialized, and operationalization takes place as discourse is imported and appropriated.

The data analyzed stems from a green transition project involving co-operation between four municipalities or municipality associated actors in Denmark and Sweden. Apart from the national differences, this 'plura-local' project covers municipalities that differ both in terms of numbers of inhabitants and in terms of being rather rural or urban. Moreover, different types of energy consumption (heating, electricity and transport) are represented. At the same time, the involved municipalities are all located in a Scandinavian context with a relatively strong public sector and with traditions for collaboration between the public sector and civil society.

The article relies on two sets of data. Firstly, data consists of transcripts of presentations and discussions at 2 so called 'experience sharing workshops' (held in May 2017 and January 2018), where the municipal employees reported experiences from their 4 local cases and related them to the overall framework of the project. Preceding the workshops, i.e. in the first stage of the project, the partners had developed a preliminary method of 'co-creational green transition', which centered on 5 principles: transparency, learning, commitment, openness and dialogue (see Horsbøl 2018 for an analysis). Following the workshops, the preliminary method was modified and refined. Although sharing concrete experiences and discussions over co-creational principles occurred throughout the whole 3 year project period, the 2 experience sharing workshops made up the phase in which the sharing of local experience was most clearly related to the general ideas of co-creation. As such, the workshops provide an opportunity to study how the overall ideas of co-creation, for instance as expressed in the 5 principles, were domesticated. This implies that the domestication examined is viewed through the lens of the participants' own representations. Thus, recontextualization and operationalization is examined via the project participants' representations of their specific experiences with attempting to practice co-creation, addressed to fellow participants from other municipalities. The second source of data is a series of monthly 'reflection papers' (March 2017 – February 2018), where the municipality employees reflected on the experiences with using the preliminary co-creational method in their local practices. These reflection papers cover approximately the same phase of the project as the workshops and constitute likewise a meeting point between general ideas of co-creation and specific local experiences. In the quotations, W1 refers to workshop 1 (May 2017) and W2 to workshop 2 (January 2018), whereas R refers to reflection paper. P1, P2, P3 and P4 refer to participants from each of the 4 municipalities.

An obvious methodological limitation is that citizens or other stakeholders are only present indirectly through the voices of the municipal employees. Therefore, this study does not claim to tell the full story of the domestication of co-creation in a green transition project. At the same time, the material provides an opportunity to focus attention on how the municipal employees understand and struggle with co-creation in a situated context when they share concrete experiences with other municipal employees.

More specifically, the analysis will be structured around 3 key stages of the represented experiences of practicing co-creation: The ways of *approaching* citizens or others in order to initiate co-creation, the *obstacles* experienced in the process, and the ways of *responding* to the obstacles. For each stage, the analysis will be guided by the notions of recontextualization and operationalization. As for recontextualization, it will be analyzed how the participants make co-creational ideas relevant and possibly question or modify these. And concerning operationalization, it will be analyzed how acting and interacting with citizens and others are represented (enactment), how the participants represent their own professional identity (inculcation) and how material or technological arrangements are articulated (materialization). The analysis will focus mainly on lexis and does not aim at a higher level of linguistic detail. However, basic categories from the transitivity analysis within Systemic Functional Linguistics (Martin and Rose 2003) will be employed, along with analysis of assumptions and evaluation (Fairclough 2003).

4. Analysis

4.1. Stage 1: Approaching the Citizens

When representing their co-creational activities, one of the most prevalent actions mentioned by the municipal participants is *listening*. The municipality actors represent themselves as listening to someone else, not least to 'citizens', but also terms like 'users' or 'stakeholders' are employed. The process of listening is often associated with expressing a purpose of 'understanding' or 'finding out', as in the following quotes:

(1) *Vi lytter til interessenterne [..]. Vi finder ud af, hvad er det der motiverer dem, hvad er det barrieren er*

[We listen to the stakeholders [..] We find out what motivates them and what the barriers are (W1, P1)].

(2) *Vi vill lyssna för at vi måste forstå*

[We want to listen because we need to understand (W1, P2)].

Sometimes, the emphasis on listening goes along with an explicit reversal of 'traditional' ideas of what counts as *knowledge* or *expertise*. Thus, it is pointed out that expertise lies with the citizen, and that it is up to the municipal employee to learn from that:

(3) *Men en rigtig god indgangsvinkel, det er jo at jeg kan altså anerkende at det er dem der er eksperter i virkeligheden*

[But a really good starting point is that I recognize that they [the citizens] are the experts in real life (W1, P1)]

(4)   *Det handlar om at jag får kunskapen av medborgaren*

[The point is that I obtain knowledge from the citizen] (W1, P2).

By way of this enactment – as someone who listens to someone in order to learn something – the municipality actors represent themselves as at the same time *active* and *receptive*. They listen not by chance, but because they have turned to someone with the purpose of becoming more knowledgeable. Moreover, this is represented not just as business as usual for the the municipal employees, but as a *new* and *demanding* task:

(5)   *För oss var det väldigt nytt, vi har jobbat i många år med rådgivning [...]. Så det krävs en hel del att ändra sig själv, dvs inte lägga orden i munnen på människor*

[To us this was really new. We have been working many years with counseling [...] So it takes quite a bit to change yourself, that is not to put words into peoples' mouth (W1, P2)]

(6)   *Og det er lidt nyt for os, fordi vi vi vi er vant til, at gå ud og arrangere et borgermøde, fordi vi ved bedst. Men vi skal virkelig øve os i, og stå og få information ind*

[And this is a bit new to us, because we are used to go out and arrange a citizen meeting because we know best. But we really have to practice it, to stand there and receive information (W1, P2)]

In the quotes above, the newness is of the approach is elaborated by being juxtaposed with other citizen oriented activities, i.e. 'counseling' and 'arranging a citizen meeting', which the municipality employees claim to be familiar with from their professional practice. On that background, the new receptive approach towards the citizens is said to take an effort: 'it takes quite a bit' and the municipality employees 'really have to practice it'. Thus, the receptive approach is represented not only as a new practice, but also as a practice that needs practice. In terms of inculcation, the municipality actors therefore not simply represent themselves as taking up a new professional identity, but as working on changing their professional identity.

At the same time, listening is represented as a social activity, and the material is rich on terms indicating sociability and communication in a broad sense. The municipality employees often 'meet' with citizens as well as arrange and take part in a 'dialogue'. They also 'invite to coffee' (W1, P2) and refer to 'conversations around the coffee tables' (W1, P3).

As indicated, the municipality actors represent themselves as initiating the conversations with the citizens. Whereas this is little surprising, it is worth noticing that the process of inviting participants to co-creation is perceived as open ended, in the sense that the municipal employees are trying to identify further participants.

(7)   *Vi er hele tiden opmærksomme på og lytte til, om der er nogen nye*
      interessenter, vi skal have med

      [All the time, we are aware that there might be other stakeholders
      we need to include (W1, P1)].

However, the activity ascribed to the municipality employees goes beyond
inviting people. Behind the invitation lies the more fundamental attempt to
engage the citizens. What exactly this implies is often not specified, but along
with 'involve', also 'co-create' or even 'co-create with' are used as verbs. While
the term 'co-create' of course represent a recontextualization from the
scholarly literature on co-creation, it is significant that the meaning is rather
vague and that the terms seems to be used interchangeably with 'involve' or
'engage'. Moreover, these actions are referred to as not yet realized, but as
something the municipality actors are trying to and working towards. 'We are
about to find out, how we involve citizens' (W1, P4), as one of them puts it.
This leads to some obstacles, which will be dealt with in the next section.

Finally, the representation of listening as a new key activity toward citizens co-
exists with representations of activities such as 'informing' or 'giving
information' on the new green energy technologies. The municipality actors
thus represent themselves both as *recipients* and *providers* of information.
This indicates a more complex professional identity, where different and, seen
in isolation, contrasting roles must be applied in different contexts.

Summing up, in terms of enactment the municipality actors represent
themselves as listening to the citizens or stakeholders with the aim of learning
from them. Furthermore the municipality actors are represented as looking
out for new participants in the co-creation process, and as trying to engage the
citizen. The term 'co-create' is used as a verb, but in a vague sense that seems
interchangeable with 'involve'. In terms of inculcation, this implies a new
professional role for the municipality employees, characterized by active
receptiveness, which is additionally viewed as in need of practicing and self-
work. However, this new role is also mixed with more 'traditional' information
giving tasks, leading to a more complex professional identity.

4.2 Stage 2: Experiencing Obstacles

The municipality actors report on a number of obstacles for realizing the co-
creation ambitions. These can be divided into at least 3 overall types.

The first and most predominant obstacle concerns, somewhat ironically
perhaps, *citizen participation*. A pattern seems to be that the citizens are
reported to show up to non-committal meetings, but that it is experienced as
difficult to engage them in further activities, as shown in the following quotes:

(8)   *der var også over 100, der var måske 160 mennesker […] og der*
      kom én efterfølgende som sagde, det vil jeg rigtig gerne være med
      til. Øh så det har også vist sig at være lidt sværere end vi havde
      formodet

[There were more than 100, maybe 160 people [at a meeting with citizens] [...] and afterwards one of them came and told us he wanted to participate. Eh so it has turned out to be a bit more difficult than we had thought (W1, P4)].

(9)   *Og så sidder de og kigger på os, og man har ikke rigtig en fornemmelse, når der er 130 mennesker, der sidder der. Men vi kunne jo, altså vi sagde, vi står der bagefter, kom og meld jer til hos os. Og der kom ikke nogen*

[And then they [the citizens at a meeting] sit and look at us, and you don't really have any hunch, when 130 people are sitting there. But we could, I mean we said, we'll be here afterwards, come and join us. And nobody showed up (W1, P1)].

In both quotes, the large number of citizens present at a public meeting is contrasted with the minimal number of citizens responding to the call for further participation. This constitutes of course a fundamental obstacle to the whole co-creation process: if almost no one takes up the invitation to participate, the whole effort will have failed and the work on a new receptive professional identity will be of no avail. In some cases, the lack of citizen interest is explained with reference to an assumed mismatch between characteristics of the citizen group and the sort of participation expected, for example when the citizens are described as 'older than expected' and 'not as ready for new technology as we expected' (R, P4). Such an explanation also indicates that a more definite form of co-creation, involving a specific technology, had been foreseen by the municipality actors. In other words, the invitation to participate was not completely open, but conditioned and framed.

In other cases, the unwillingness to participate is ascribed to citizens' perceptions of the municipality and to the citizens being unaccustomed to co-operating with the municipality:

(10) *Vi bliver særligt mødt af folk som også synes, det er også er lidt mærkeligt at vi skal til at samarbejde med kommunen og at vi- at det ikke bare er nogen der kommer for at håndhæve en lov*

[we are particularly approached by people who think that it is a bit strange that we are going to co-operate with the municipality and that we- that it isn't is just someone who comes to enforce a law (W1, P1)].

Via the mental process 'think, the quote reconstructs a citizen attitude towards the municipality, more precisely towards the relationship between citizens and municipality. Since the knowledge source of the reconstruction is said to be encounters with people, the account does reflect the listening approach presented in the previous section – as opposed to the use of readymade sociological explanations such as that older people are less willing to use new technologies. As for the content of the reported citizen attitude, a contrast is

made between two citizen-municipality relationships: co-operation versus the municipality enforcing a law, where the latter is said to correspond to the existing expectations of the citizens. This expectation explains why citizens allegedly find it 'a bit strange' to co-operate with the municipality. As an evaluation this is not outright dismissive of the new relationship, but an expression of being unaccustomed to it and perhaps somewhat reserved.

The quote thus establishes an equivalent to the previously analyzed representation of co-creation as a new and demanding task for the municipality employee. The novelty is on both sides of the relation, requiring also a *changed citizen attitude* towards the municipality. However, whereas the municipal actors represent themselves as working on and practicing their new professional role, the citizens in the above quote are not said to do a similar work. They are simply represented as having attitudes and expectations. In a similar vein, a municipality employee states that co-creation as a term should be avoided in communication with citizens since 'no one gets it' (W1, P1), i.e. also with a use of a mental process to characterize the citizen actions. How the municipality actors respond to these represented obstacles of citizen perceptions, will be dealt with in section 4.3.

Another obstacle mentioned is *time*. 'It takes time to work co-creationally' (W1, P2), as one participant observes, and concerns are uttered as to whether this time-consuming work can continue beyond the 3 year long project. Furthermore, different time-horizons or time-scales (Lemke 2000) seem to be involved. First, the time scales of potentially engaged citizen may collide with the time scale of the municipal bureaucracy, as citizens are said to 'loose the energy if the decision takes six months' (W1, P1). And second, the preferred time-scale for the co-creation project may be overruled by time constraints from external partners, as stated in the following quote:

(11) *jeg kunne godt tænke mig, at vi måske havde haft en lidt længere proces [...]. Men det hele skal passe ind i den her meget meget stramme tidsplan fra CITYNAME Varme*

[I would have preferred that we had perhaps had a somewhat longer process [...]. But it all has to fit into this very very tight schedule from CITYNAME utility (W1, P4)].

Both the reference to bureaucracy time and to the schedule of a utility partner point to co-creation as not just a matter of interaction between municipality employee and citizens, but as embedded into a wider web of (inter)organizational obligations and constraints.

This leads into the third obstacle mentioned, which consist in pressure or opposition from other actors. For instance, one municipality employee refers to overt opposition from a person, who earns his living from maintaining and servicing some of the oil burners that are supposed to be removed as a result of the co-creation process. In the participants' reflection papers, this is reported as follows:

(12) *Til fællesmødet gav han udtryk for, at kommunen ikke skal blande sig i borgernes opvarmning, at der ikke er et problem og at han var rasende over indsatsen*

[At the public meeting, he conveyed that the municipality should't interfere with the citizens' heating, that there isn't any problem and that he was infuriated by the initiative (R, P1)].

This is obviously represented as an opposing voice, and one may note that it is reported at all, and not ignored or dismissed as moaning. Again, this reporting can be said to reflect the receptive approach presented in the previous example, while at the same time, in terms of the reported content, questioning the premise of the whole enterprise. The questioning concerns the co-operation between municipality and citizens as such, which is reformulated pejoratively as the municipality interfering with the citizens' heating. And the questioning concerns the specific environmental issue of oil burners, referred to with the dismissal that 'there isn't any problem'. In the material, this is the only example of blatant opposition, but examples can be found of pressure from other powerful actors, such as the utility mentioned above, which are reported to counteracts the co-creational ambitions of the project participants.

To sum up, obstacles to co-creation are reported to stem from in particular lack of citizen participation, mismatch between timescales, and pressure from external actors with conflicting interests. Citizen voices are reported, and this reporting at same time challenges the very foundation of the co-creational project, i.e. content-wise, and reflects the receptive inculcation analyzed in section 4.1., i.e. reporting-wise. The citizens are represented as having perceptions of the municipality which are at odds with the co-creational approach, but in contrast to the municipality actors, they are not represented as involved in any self-work challenging those perceptions, let alone in co-operation with the municipality.

4.3. Stage 3: Responding to the Obstacles

In the course of the project period, the municipality employees respond to the obstacles described in section 4.2. Several reported responses could be subsumed under the heading *development of new communication formats*. Whereas the municipality actors in stage 1 dissociate themselves from what is conceived as traditional citizen meetings, as noted in section 4.1., they do at that point hardly offer any specific alternatives to these meetings. Instead, the notion of listening is put forward, resulting in a very general receptive approach. However, this changes in stage 3, where the municipality participants report to engage in a variety of new communication formats for structuring the interaction with citizens. One example is the so called 'tupperware parties' that are arranged in the private homes of people who have expressed some interest in removing their oil burner (R, P1). The house owners volunteer to invite relevant people in their neighborhood, and in exchange an energy consultant is invited, paid by the municipality, to provide (semi)personal guidance. This format is presented by the municipality employee as a response to calls from the citizens for more personal and customized advice. As such it reflects the receptive professional identity aimed

at, while at the same time resulting in a more specific communication format. Another example is the use of what is referred to as an 'early adaptor', *in casu* a person who drives a Tesla, to take part in meetings with citizens in order to 'inspire, talk and engage better than we can' (W2, P2). A third reported example is the so called 'knowledge sharing meetings' where participants with different backgrounds (citizens, craftsmen and other specialists) were mixed, seated at tables and given specific discussion tasks by the municipal actors (R, P1).

The examples show that *genre considerations* come to play a stronger role in the course of the project. The formats developed generally involve a *revised communicative style* with a more pronounced position for the municipality employees in terms of setting the scene and organizing the interaction. This change from the purely receptive position is also argued, as in the following quote, where the metonymy of a blank piece of paper represents the initial, completely open receptiveness, now seen as less productive:

(13) *Samskabelse er svært, hvis man starter fra bunden med et blankt stykke papir.*

      [Co-creation is difficult if you start from the bottom with a blank piece of paper (R, P4)].

As part of these genre considerations, the municipality employees represent themselves as interacting with the citizens in a more diverse and active way. Thus, the enactment repertoire has been both widened and specified.

Moreover, as part of the genre considerations, the *material arrangement*, including the use of space, is represented as important. This involves the physical presence of a Tesla car, the use of tables to stage discussions, or the siting of meetings in private homes. Thus, materialization seems to play a role in this third stage that could not previously be observed. That is, whereas enactment and inculcation develops during the process, materialization seems to come to play a role only in the last stage. However, it is interesting that references to the use of social network sites are rare and insignificant. Facebook, is mentioned now and then, but social media doesn't appear to play an important role in the developed communication formats.

Related, but not reductive to the introduction of new communication format is the engagement of *intermediaries* between the municipality and the citizens. In relation to the case on removal of oil burners, the intermediary is defined as follows:

(14) *Vi tror, at der er behov for en "mellemmand" til at samskabe. Det er ikke nødvendigvis tænkt som en oliefyrsejer, men som en der kan drive og motivere borgerne i et bestemt område. Det kan være formanden for borgerforeningen, medlemmer af landsbyforum eller andre som har "fingerne på pulsen" i et område.*

> [We believe that there is a need for an "intermediary" to co-create. It doesn't need to be someone who owns an oil burner, but someone who can drive and motivate the citizens in a certain area. It can be the chairman of the civic association, members of Village Forum [an association of villages in the council] or others who have their "fingers on the pulse" in an area (R, P1)].

Other municipality employees refer to the engagement of 'early adopters' (R, P2; W2, P3), such as the above mentioned Tesla driver, but as the quote indicates, the category of 'intermediary' goes beyond that and includes people who are not necessarily users of the energy devices at stake. Instead of early adoption of devices, they seem to be defined by a central position in the social networks of a given area and by their ability to exert an influence on other citizens' decisions. As with the introduction of new communicative formats, the engagement of intermediaries is represented as a response to the reported shortage of citizen engagement.

Thirdly, a more *refined vocabulary* for participants in the co-creation process can be observed. This includes nomination of actors other than the addressed citizens, such as 'intermediaries', 'energy consultants' and 'craftsmen'. But it also includes a vocabulary for the different positions citizens can assume if involved in co-creation with the municipality. One example is a 'decision ladder', developed by one of the university participants, which classifies different stages in citizens' decision-making process towards the acquirement of renewable energy devices. Another example is the term *'early adopter'*, which originates in studies of diffusion of innovation (Rogers 1962) where it refers to the smaller group of people who locally start adopting innovations that has been developed by the even smaller group of venturesome, cosmopolite 'innovators'. In the theory of diffusions of innovation, the early adopter thereby constitutes the link between the globally oriented innovator and the majority of users in a given locality. This concept, which precedes the discourse on co-creation by far and has been widely used within communication studies, is thus recontextualized by the municipality employees to designate the user of the energy devices or solutions to be advanced in the project. This assumes a position of a majority of citizens addressed as potential *followers* of the early adopters ('early majority' and 'late majority' in Rogers' terms (ibid.)), i.e. a considerably less co-creational position than envisioned in the scholarly literature on co-creation.

However, terms which originate in the scholarly discourse of co-creation are also used to categorize different citizen positions. For instance, the differentiation between citizen positions as co-implementer, co-designer and co-initiator (se section 2) is drawn upon in order to define the degrees of co-creation in the current project and to compare it with other municipality led green transition projects. This points towards a more *reflective* professional role in which co-creation is neither just assumed nor pursued, but put into question and reflected upon.

Finally, terms from the scholarly discourse of co-creation are recontextualized in a way that marks a shift from the pronounced 'listening' approach in stage 1. Thus, one of the participants observes that 'if we ask them [the citizens] to

share their experiences and we at the same time share our experiences and images of reality, then co-creation starts to occur' (R, P1). Here, *mutual sharing* is represented as an activity that triggers co-creation. This is in line with the scholarly literature on co-creation (see the definition by Torfing et al. 2016 in section 2), both in the sense that the sharing of knowledge and experience is crucial, and in the sense that this mutual sharing is not the final destination of co-creation, but the process by which it may emerge. This marks a clear shift in comparison with the more unidirectional 'listening' approach in stage 1. Moreover, the shift is linked to the increased attention on genre and communicative formats as it is said to 'depend upon how they [the citizens] are invited into the conversation' (R, P1). Thus, the staging of interaction with citizens is represented as a way of conditioning the emergence of co-creation.

To sum up the third stage, the municipal employees first and foremost report on responding to the obstacle of a lack of citizen engagement. This is met with a variety of communicative formats which are significantly more specific than the introductory emphasis on listening to the citizens. Moreover, the municipality actors play an active role as staging the interaction, and materializations form an important part of the intensified genre considerations. Thus, in terms of enactment, the municipality employees represent themselves as interacting with the citizens in both more specific and more conducting ways. Moreover, a shift from the focus on listening to the citizens towards a focus on mutually sharing knowledge and experiences with the citizens can be observed, whereby key ideas from the scholarly literature on co-creation are recontextualized. The successful staging of interactions with citizens is represented as a condition for the mutual sharing. However, terms from diffusion theory are also used, which implies a more subordinate citizen position than imagined in the literature on co-creation. Furthermore, other actors are articulated, not least local intermediaries, through which the municipality actors indirectly interact with the citizens. Thus, in terms of inculcation, the municipality employees appear to take up an identity as *facilitators* of interaction, both by planning and staging interaction with citizens, and by engaging intermediaries which are then again supposed to engage citizens.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

This article set out to study how general ideas of co-creation were domesticated in a municipality led project aiming a green energy transition. This has been done by analyzing how ideas and principles of co-creation were recontextualized and operationalized, i.e. enacted, inculcated and materialized, as the municipality participants exchanged their local experiences with co-creation in the course of the project.

The analysis shows that the domestication *evolves significantly* during the examined project period. Initially, the municipality participants represent themselves as inculcating a rather vague role of active receptiveness towards to the citizens, characterized by a reversal of what is seen as traditional municipality-citizen communication. However, prompted by reported difficulties in the engagement of citizens, a more specific as well as a more

initiating inculcation appear. Key in this inculcation is that the municipality employees stage and organize interactions with citizens, and that these interactions include mutual sharing of knowledge and experiences. A development can thus be observed towards an operationalization, which is in line with scholarly definitions of what distinguishes co-creation from citizen involvement in general. As part of this development, genre considerations and materializations come to play a much more important part. Furthermore, in comparison with studies of public controversies over energy transition, it is striking that the obstacles reported do not concern citizens struggling for power or opposing governing initiatives, but citizens being reluctant to participate.

The recontextualization of the ideas of co-creation goes along with recontextualization of other notions of public sector communication with citizens. For example, ideas from *diffusion theory* are taken up, assuming a more subordinate and instrumental citizen position. Moreover, the idea of engaging intermediaries as a way of involving citizens in energy transition activities has clear similarities with the *two-step flow theory of communication* (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955), which is originally oriented towards citizen persuasion rather than co-operation. Thus, tensions between the co-creational ideas of mutual sharing and problem solving on the one hand and more instrumental and persuasive articulations on the other can be identified.

These tensions can be seen in the context of what appears to be a more *complex professional identity* for the municipality employee. The municipality participants represent the enactment of co-creation as a new practice that needs practice, and in relation to this new practice several tasks, including facilitating and, more traditionally, provision of information are articulated. Thus, there seems to be a need to integrate quite different, and partly opposite, roles into the municipal employee's professional identity. The fact that a reflective component is part of this role complex too, allowing for reflection upon what co-creation is and should imply in the local case, is interesting. However, this role complex is also quite demanding and raises questions about what reasonably can be expected from the co-creating municipal employee.

While the idea of a new professional identity for public sector employees is recognized in the scholarly literature on co-creation, this study may contribute by pointing to the complexity of this professional identity as well as to the specific obstacles of realizing co-creation, seen from the perspective of the public sector employee. Moreover, the analysis points to tensions between more collaborative and more persuasive approaches to citizen involvement, probably reflecting wider discourses circulating in the municipal organizations. This illustrates that the notion of co-creation is domesticated in an already populated discursive space, and that this space will have implications for the ways in which co-creation is locally made sense of.

Finally, the municipality participants' increased attention to communicative formats as well as to the material and social setting of co-creation, resulting from the obstacles encountered in the course of the project, would support combining the often social science oriented literature on co-creation with discourse studies of communicative formats used in the co-creation process.

From a discourse studies perspective, these formats should be seen not just as tools but as imbued with ideational and interpersonal implications. Discourse analyses would be productive of both the more generic form envisaged by the planning municipal employees and the concrete realization in the interaction with citizens.

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