

PUBLIC ORGANIZATIONS, STAKEHOLDERS AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF PUBLICNESS. CLAIMS AND DEFENCE OF AUTHORITY IN PUBLIC ACTION

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This article seeks to highlight the conditions in which organizations with different levels of 'publicness' interact in the framework of policy-making. In France, decision making and implementation is shared among public, semi-public and private organizations. The specific responsibility and influence of public organizations within institutional collective action however is a source of ambiguity. It becomes therefore a matter of political authority for public organizations to invest in the structuring of public problems and policies. The case analysed here shows that the publicness of implemented policies is a construction which stakeholders may try to influence. Responses by public organizations show that publicness does not only relate to the plurality of organizational forms but also to the existence of a form of hierarchy within systems of governance themselves.

INTRODUCTION

Political authority is classically associated with hierarchical dominance and responsibility. The organizations which retain authority are in general public because they are close to elected principals and are responsible for the definition of the general interest and implementation of policies. This article addresses the following problem: if hierarchical dominance and the responsibility of public organizations do not characterize the processes by which policies are structured – because problem-structuring, decision-making and implementation are negotiated within networks of public and private actors – the political authority induced by the responsibility of steering public action may escape public organizations. The emergence of relational approaches to policy-making (under the heading of governance and network theories) therefore reinforces the statement that all organizations are public (Bozeman 1987). This approach also questions the specificity of public organizations' actions (such as in national ministries, State agencies and regulatory agencies) within policy systems. What is their specific influence or authority in the formulation of public problems and the implementation of policies?

The case study on which this article is based relates to the action of a national Association in France which gathers together councillors, civil

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servants or professionals involved in the management of a local service called the 'night-wardens'. Night-wardens look after a delimited area (for example, an insecure suburban district) at night and respond to the demands of inhabitants who feel insecure, need mediation in their relations with neighbours or are in need of medical assistance. Night-warden services have been set up in a number of cities in France. The service is conceived of as a 'public policy' by its promoters. It is believed that the service should be supported by State subsidies and extended to all cities since night-wardens fulfil a 'public' mission and contribute to the improvement of 'public action'.

The article investigates how the national Association both used this publicness argument and interacted with the national administration in charge of the regulation of urban mediation. The literature review that follows examines the different approaches of the problem of publicness, trying to relate this to policy-making. There follows a presentation of the case study and the discussion.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The 'publicness puzzle': towards an inter-organizational and public action point of view

The 'publicness puzzle' according to Bozeman and Bretschneider (1994) in organizational studies led to the search for the most relevant criteria of publicness. For instance, Haque (2001) defines it as the extent of an organization's: 'distinction from the private sector, the scope and composition of its service recipients, the magnitude and intensity of its socioeconomic role, the degree of its public accountability, and the level of its public trust' (Haque 2001, p. 67). In this approach, publicness is the main characteristic of the organizations which structure democratic political systems. Such an approach uses publicness as an *a priori* category according to which organizations may be sorted (Rainey and Bozeman 2000).

Publicness also relates to both action and policies. An organization is public in so far as it contributes to the implementation of public policies, has received a mandate defined by a principal (a third party of a different nature, usually politically legitimate, which defines which interests public organizations are to serve), and is exposed to the political arena (Thoenig 2001). Publicness is thus the core element of any political system rather than the characteristic of a certain type of organization at a given moment in the historical development of societies (pluralistic, accountable, and so on); it accounts for the existence of a type of authority expressed through public action. In such a 'dimensional approach' (Bozeman and Bretschneider 1994), institutional collective action of public organizations mirror the differences between public and less public organizations. The empirical work consists in tracking processes in order to find the traces of authority throughout scenes where the rhetoric of cooperation dominates.

Many policy-making theories do not apply this perspective, taking it for granted that problem-solving will be entrusted to public authorities and that cooperation with non-public organizations will be limited to the structuring of the public problem. According to the 'social problems' and 'issue-attention cycle' approaches (Downs 1972; Spector and Kitsuse 1977), public authorities alone have the capacity to cope with problems (Parsons 1995). The transfer of an issue to the institutional agenda, then, marks the end of the game for any third actors. The intervention of public organizations in the decision-making process is conceived of as a mandatory and an *a posteriori* event. It is assumed that policy publicness comes from the intervention of a public organization whose input is constraining.

Policy networks (Hecló 1974; Kingdon 1984; Cook and Skogan 1991) and advocacy coalition theories (Sabatier 1988) do not question this. Policy processes take place within 'networks' and 'communities', which are characterized by a certain set of ideas, beliefs and values. The problem of 'publicness' is enclosed within the problem of the access to these groups. Sabatier takes the view that most phases of the policy-making process are dominated by the elite opinion. Policy brokers (civil servants, elected officials, and so on) and that 'sovereigns' control the policy subsystems (in which policies are conceived by competing coalitions) (Sabatier 1988). The public character of the policy eventually decided is drawn from the fact that decision makers are in essence 'public'. Policy networks are part of the power structure of a sector, but the core of it is always elite or public organizations, and the publicness of a policy trickles down from the way the problem is tackled. These approaches, much like the notion of governance, argue that formal structures and responsibilities hardly matter in the structuring of policies, but these approaches still hold implicit the fact that public organizations control these processes.

The interdependence between public authorities and other organizations in public action

However, organizations are interdependent beyond this stage of problem-structuring. According to neo-institutionalism, the policy-making processes represent an environment which affects the behaviour of participating organizations (Parsons 1995). Neo-institutionalism has demonstrated that agenda-setting and problem construction are bounded by constitution, rules, resources and institutions which shape the conduct of politics and the rules of the game (March and Olsen 1989). The term 'institution', however, does not equate to public organizations. Neo-institutionalists describe public and private organizations in the same terms, whether they refer to the autonomy and capacity of decision makers (Simon 1945) or to the influence of uncertainty and ambiguity on the adoption by public and private organizations alike of models which are seen as successful (Di Maggio and Powell 1983). Similarly, Lindblom and Woodhouse (1993) have showed that participation in policy-making is not specific to public organizations but are a preserve of

those groups which are powerful and well-resourced. Institutionalization is an open process (Scott 1987), accessible to many organizations (Egeberg 2002).

Thus, institutionalization – more than publicness – explains the amount of power or influence in policy-making. A publicness view would insist on the fact that responsibility determines influence. But this reading overlooks the fact that the increasing interdependencies between central State and local authorities blur responsibilities. The recourse to constitutive policies (Lowi 1972) and the emphasis on ‘coordination’ reveal that the sharing of responsibilities in the implementation and evaluation of a policy is the central issue in the structuring of policies. This is all the more true as a number of policy problems demand continuous reformulations (environmental risk, crime-control, sexual behaviour and food safety, for instance) and a chain of responsibilities. Within such policy spaces, the realistic objectives are difficult to find, and variables difficult to grasp (Muller 1996). This echoes the growing importance of implementation (Dehousse 2002), whereby problems are administered through a continuous adjustment of the actions and responsibilities of stakeholders (Neyer 2000). The concept of public action stresses that there is less compartmentalization between policy sectors and responsibilities than used to be the case. Policies possess intertwined effects and evaluations and therefore involve a process of adjustment. They are, then, the result of constant cooperation between sectoral administrations. They consist of a continuous stream of actions – including evaluations of past programmes and new instructions from principals – whereby implementation and decision making are less clearly separated (Thoening 1998). A conclusion of this is that the solving of societal problems, ‘may or may not be solved through the entrustment of public authorities’ (Duran 1999). This implies that the action of public organizations does not equal public action. Does it make it possible for a stakeholder to cumulate responsibility and influence, contesting political authority with public organizations?

OUTLINE OF RESEARCH

In a number of French cities, night-wardens take care of council housing tenants within the poorer suburbs. They intervene in private homes, in delimited areas, between the hours of 21:00 and 3:00. They answer to all demands made by inhabitants (who call wardens using a mobile phone), including those in conflict with neighbours or in need of medical assistance. The wardens are drawn into interventions on the types of problems for which police or social workers are often neither available nor competent in these particular issues. This service is innovative in two regards: it is a new type of intervention (mingling the competencies of social workers and policemen) as well as a new type of local management (the agents are employed by an independent agency, funded by several municipal and regional institutions). Between 1995 and 1999, the number of night-warden services quickly grew to around 50. The focus of the present research was

the extent to which practices are standardized, and the capacity to network all initiatives, create norms and influence national administrations.

The research is based on a four-month period of semi-structured interviews that were conducted in 2001. There were several levels of inquiry: (1) the services themselves; (2) the localities; (3) the Association of Night-Warden Managers (the Association), which gathers actors from around 30 cities; and (4) the Interdepartmental Committee for the Evaluation of Mediation Policies (the Committee), which is steered by the interdepartmental Agency for Urban Social Development (the Agency). A total of 50 interviews in seven cities were carried out with night-wardens, managers of services, members of the Association and officials of the Agency.

The interviews were aimed at reconstructing the setting-up of the night-warden services in order to assess their comparability. The role of those who were most active in each city was scrutinized. A number of comparative grids helped to group cities into different types. For this, it appeared that what is described as a 'policy' by the Association is in fact a loosely coupled set of practices. The form of the coordination and the outcome of the initiative depends largely on the local factors of mobilization (that is, existing policies for difficult suburbs, leadership of the project exerted by the municipality (or rather by professionals within the municipality), support from the police force, and so on).

The Association's activity and impact on local practices was studied through interviews. Attendance of councillors at the meetings was investigated through quantitative data. Findings appeared to show that the involvement in the service at the local level and in the Association is coherently organized in the person who takes on the role of entrepreneur. The most proactive local entrepreneurs, then, drive the internal development of the Association. Local processes therefore have a direct impact on the message conveyed by the Association as a whole. Both the interviews conducted with Agency officials and the minutes of Committee meetings were analysed with a view to understanding the following: (1) how the substantive message of the Association got across; (2), the attitude of the Agency's officials towards local actors, and (3) the various agendas and priorities of Committee members.

CASE STUDY DATA

Publicization as a mobilization strategy

The setting up of a night-warden service is usually motivated by the fact that it increases the welfare of inhabitants and helps members of the Association become acquainted with individual situations which might otherwise escape the attention of social and police services. Strict institutional supervision of night-wardens is a necessary precursor to this. The aim of this is to prevent night-wardens stepping into the professional areas of policemen and social workers. Policing and social work are two

professionalized public occupations which belong to State prerogatives (in France, urban policing was brought back into the prerogative of the central State in the 1940s). Any initiative of significance that is undertaken, such as the setting up of a night-warden service, must be coordinated with local State administrations.

The decision to set up a service is usually based on a set of understandings about a target: that the inhabitants have agreed to the existence of the service; that there is a need (i.e. deprived and isolated urban areas); and a set of problems which remain unresolved despite the daytime duty of care of social workers and police. The interventions carried out by the wardens are manifold. Rather than insisting on one issue therefore, the originators of the scheme have concentrated their efforts – in order to collect funds from public organizations and to secure their active support – on convincing partners that night-wardens fulfil a mission that is of public interest.

In Rennes, the city where the service was invented, the originators went through an evaluation of existing public policies. Through a process of trial and error, they have shown that a number of existing services and policies were inefficient in tackling certain situations. They also constructed a social demand – for instance, by asking inhabitants to vote on the setting up of the service – which resulted in a positive vote. On these grounds, the originators went on to convince the other institutions concerned that: (a) they were accountable for the solving of these problems; but that (b) an independent agency should be created. The decisive argument was the necessity for the institutions concerned to take into account this ‘continent’ of phenomena that they underestimate (namely, the specific conditions in which social and psychological unrest develop at night). Their argument was that both information and coordination would be improved through the setting up of a pivotal organization. By the mere fact of agreeing to fund the service and meet the demand of inhabitants regarding nightly interventions, the partners agreed to consider the mission of night-wardens as a public one. However, such a social construction of the service – as ‘public policy’ – is local. In the first city where the service was set up, inhabitants were asked to contribute financially to the service. Local managers theorized that this contribution was a guarantee that inhabitants tacitly accepted the intervention of night-wardens since, on this basis, financial contribution constituted, to an outsider, evidence that night-wardens were a private security service. This was extremely negatively connoted since policing and crime-control are central State prerogatives. Vigorous debates have arisen between representatives of different cities on whether mediation should be considered a public service. Social workers involved in action within one given suburb were typically against; other services dominated by civil servants or elected principals, whose projects concerned the whole city, were favourable to the idea. The perceived status of the leading actor and the service’s legitimacy therefore influences this construction of the service as a public one.

The setting-up of the Association and the theorization of 'publicness'

The multiplication of services took place in a framework of gradual decentralization of prerogatives from national State administrations to the various territories. Many policies (transportation, crime-control, and so on) are now implemented through contractualization between local actors, that is, decentralized State services, elected officials and professionals. Objectives and responsibilities are defined according to local conventions (Gaudin 1999). Interest in the service emerged because of the lack of guidance by national administrations about urban crime control and as a result of social unrest in suburbs known to be difficult cases. In the context just described, the lack of State guidelines became the backbone of local conventions and prompted the exchange of best practices among local players.

The policy was first carried out experimentally in Rouen and Rennes then subsequently in 50 other cities. The manager of the service in Rennes (himself a city councillor) greatly helped the diffusion. He actively committed himself by reporting to the media and undertook a number of lectures. He disseminated the lessons he drew from the year of experimentation. People from other cities then came to Rennes in order to assess the functioning of the service. It was the Rennes councillor whose idea it was to network all the services from the various cities. So successful was the service in Rennes, that it was thought of as a way of improving public action across all territories. Its popularity with other cities implied that an Association once formed could adequately support the exchange of best practices, make the service visible, and raise funds to set up more of them.

Managers of the Association went as far as to theorize their policy as a way to 'renovate public action' and adapt it to changing social behaviour regarding time expenditure (Greenwood *et al.* 2002). However, as was indicated above, presenting the night-wardens as a 'public policy' is a construction that applies in a specific setting. The very basis of the night-warden intervention means it has to be adapted to individual needs. It is almost impossible to give evidence of the achievements of the night-warden initiative on the basis of data collected since night-wardens themselves find it difficult to analyse and describe their interventions. It is difficult to provide ancillary help so that they might be able to do this because they are and must be unaccompanied when taking care of inhabitants. Moreover, both the missions and the mandate of night-wardens vary greatly from city to city. Depending on how much support the night-wardens receive and what managers have negotiated, night-wardens may or may not be allowed to act in, say, instance of fire or of heart attack.

Whereas the multiplication of the service indicates some form of general validity and 'publicness' – since it was elected principals and civil servants in some cities who bought in the initiatives – the actions carried out by night-wardens are not easily captured as a data set and all in all it does not support the theorization of the service as public. Workshops organized by the Association tentatively capture the diversity of structures (the financing,

the juridical structure of the service, the working contract used to employ mediators, and so on) and create a quantitative indicator of the impact of the services throughout the cities. To understand night-wardens' practices, the Association would therefore need to keep track of the way in which the service was set up, what type of professional person supervises the service (a social worker, a civil servant, and so on), the support it has from local institutions, the result of negotiations concerning the missions and funding of the service, the size of concerned suburbs and the intensity of the investment in these problems by elected principals.

The ambiguity of the publicness of the action carried out in the various cities directly affects the functioning of the Association. Managers of the Association expend a great deal of effort in trying to find the services' common denominator. This effort is apparent in the structure of the Association. Managers insist on getting a mandate from the members in order to represent them fully and to convey a collectively defined message. Official field representatives are tasked with organizing meetings of members at the regional or local level. They take care of the synthesizing of practices and opinions. They look after the convergence of those adopting the general stance of the organization as held up by the representatives. Those procedures allow the organization to set up a position, which is both in tune with practices of local members and the overall claim that the night-warden initiative is close to a public policy which fits into the agenda of national administrations. However, it should be mentioned here that many collective projects faced resistance from other cities.

The Association *vis-à-vis* the national administration: hopes of general appropriateness and claims for publicness

The Agency set up a committee (the Standing Committee for the Evaluation of Local Mediation Initiatives, hereafter the Committee) in order to evaluate the effectiveness of local initiatives; the night-wardens being just one example of these. The agenda of this committee is mainly focused on the assessment of the impact of the 'emplois-jeunes' programme, which consists in the subsidization by the State of the recruitment of young people by associations or administrations for the delivering of non-profitable or innovative services, implemented across different policy sectors. All the bodies involved in the programme are represented in this Committee (the ministry of education, the national rail company, and so on). The members of the Committee share a belief in the efficiency of local action. It comprises civil servants from both the French Home Office and the Agency for Urban and Social Development, bodies which have committed to street-level work. In most cases they have been civil servants within local State administrations at some point in their career and have faith in research projects carried out in contact with the population at large. The work of this Committee is essential because it constitutes the only public arena which deals with this programme and hence with the problem of social unrest and insecurity in

difficult suburbs. It echoes the concerns and actions of the local actors who responded to this programme by actively investing in the uptake of new activities and structures.

The necessity for the Agency to stay in tune with local outcomes from their programmes is held to be a priority. In the framework of the evaluation of previously implemented programmes, opportunities appeared for more interaction between the Committee and the Association, as well as with other professional associations. The Committee was set up after a reasonably long period of time and this has allowed local projects to develop. The decision to set up the Committee is justified by the necessity to approach local projects under a common perspective and simultaneously as far as possible. We can reasonably assume that national administrations favour the setting up of some general measuring tool for mediation services if these can be compared. The consultation of local players whose initiatives gained a reputation within networks of actors involved in urban regeneration (the network of local council housing agencies, for instance) is rooted in the necessity to make such local initiatives comparable.

The leader of the Association sees the Association itself as part of this picture. Their agenda – the exchange of practice and fund-raising to increase the number of night-warden services – is supposedly in line with the institutional agenda of the Agency. The originator of the service in Rennes (the first and most successful service), is now President of the Association and has already been interviewed by a Member of Parliament within the framework of an evaluation of the national urban security policy. Contact with the Committee will be made through the Agency official who chairs the Committee and who was part of the MP's mission.

Our interviews showed that the claim of the Association that the night-wardens should be seen as a public policy, addressing a hitherto neglected public problem (urban life at night), was not welcomed by the Agency. At the end of the day, the Agency proceeded as far as the hearing of the managers of the Association, but in their capacity as local night-wardens' managers. The Agency did not accede to the request of the Association to fund their activity in order to set up new services, but opted rather to concentrate on the evaluation of the interventions of the night-wardens, with a view to professionalizing this occupation. The Agency thus implicitly turned down the claims of some members of the Association – who considered that the effectiveness of the work of night-wardens was due to a form of coordination of institutional actors around municipalities – something that these councillors considered to be a recipe for tackling various local problems. The Agency concentrated on the occupation of night-warden itself rather than on mobilization and by that action denied the service its status of public policy.

DISCUSSION

The theorization of suburban night-wardens in France into French public policy equates to an inversion of how things usually work in France.

National State administrations set up standard solution that local actors then take up and tend to adapt as part of implementation. Here we find instead, a situation where national institutions are not able to state what and how a problem should be attacked, putting practices back into their local context: it was local actors announced the practices that should be made 'public' or national. Indeed, the local Association challenged the legitimacy of public institutions to know and to decide which practices should be the ones extended. It is public institutions who are supposed to be monopolistically endowed with the ability to discern what should be a 'general' measure, applied to a territory nationwide.

This case shows that in policy matters, where local action is the centre of gravity of implementation, the policy-making process entails a negotiation among certain actors regarding what course of action should be promoted as 'public' and therefore taken up in regulations. In that sense, policy-making is open to innovative forms of coordination around locally defined problems, to theorization of policies, and to mobilization of third actors which cast themselves in the role of property owners of public policies. Thus, being part of a national administration may not be sufficient to command public action. Which factors can be said to account for the assertion by the Agency of its own preference and agenda in the face of a well-resourced actor? Two possible lines of interpretation are presented here, followed by a critique. The challenge that the construction of policy 'publicness' implies for national administrations is then detailed.

Policy diffusion and institutionalization of the Association

The Association is based on a sort of constituency (their membership). Managers are given a mandate, which can be withdrawn as soon as the positions that the organization holds up publicly do not fit with members' opinions and practices. The Association in itself is skeletal. It does not have significant funds, its premises are small and it has few employees. But the many different platforms for meeting and exchanging practices allow an evaluation of the effectiveness of national administrations' decisions. The knowledge of the outcomes of national programmes is permitted by the very embeddedness of the Association activity into a restricted constituency.

Furthermore, the linkage between the membership and their managers allow the latter to maintain an objectivity regarding technical discussions, and to dedicate themselves to the participation in various committees at the national level. The leaders of the Association see themselves as members of central policy networks. They are socialized to the methods, norms and language used within these networks, and know how to behave in this context. They benefit from the necessity for national administrations to formally meet and listen to local actors and from the knowledge they themselves draw, from their own experiments as local players, of the outcomes of the policy conceived both at the central level and in various cities. The leaders of the Association, for example, lay much emphasis on the efficiency gap that

exists between the policies they recommend and the ones that national administrations implement. By demonstrating their knowledge of local situations and of appropriate solutions, they provide explanations of societal situations and identify the organizations which could be entrusted with effecting a solution (Gusfield 1981).

Reaching such a position implies negotiation around a number of organizational problems. The leaders of the Association need to encourage members both to build on their practices to define and elaborate a common position, and mandate some representatives to convey this position. There is a homology between the message conveyed (collective action in the fight against insecurity, coordinated by city Mayors) and the internal working of the organization as a network that strives for convergence of local practices. This homology between the procedures and the substance requires a carefully composed membership. Arguably, the stress on 'networking' strikes an appropriate balance, or leaves just enough ambiguity around the goals of the Association. Effectively, this way of organizing the contacts between people helps to legitimize the existence of the organization both for the members themselves and for the partners at a national level. The network strategy is a strategy of legitimacy building since it helps the organization make its internal working consistent with the message diffused. If local actions help in tackling public problems, the networking of these actions by the Association legitimizes its claim that it has a 'semi-public' mission.

Additional to this problem of coordination, there remains a statutory requirement for the managers of this network (Greenwood *et al.* 2002). Along with cognitive and normative ideas – such as the necessity to have an independent agency and the lack of public services at night – the modes of translation of these ideas into organizational practices also circulate between cities (Hasselbladh and Kallinikos 2000). Along with the necessity to coordinate local actors around the night-warden service, some actors tried to promote their own practices. For instance, the manager of the service in Rennes promoted the solution of the independent association as the best way to ensure coordination between actors. However, some actors in one territory may refuse to adopt a solution set out in another territory. This became a matter of conflict between members of the Association. The way actors should be coordinated, then, remains a matter of entrepreneurship, of adjustment to local situations and of independence in the interpretation of norms. The continuous effort of the leader of the Association to generalize the achievements of its experimental practices and legitimize them by referring to non-locality-related problems, raised resistance from certain local actors since this theorizing was taken as a marketing strategy.

The interaction between the cognitive and the pragmatic dimension of action prevents a vision of 'diffusion' as the institutionalization of a homogeneous organizational field. However similar their practices may be, actors tend to theorize them in a different way. Such theorizations can easily be countered by referring to another group of cities. Discourses tend to have an

extremely unstable basis and to undergo re-specifications. Definitions of the problem that night-wardens address oscillate between a wide definition (the culmination of minor delinquent events which create a feeling of insecurity) and a much more focused one (drug trafficking or juvenile delinquency, for instance). Factors inducing insecurity are either very large (faulty urban planning; unemployment) or confined. The recipients of any remedial action can either be conceived of as all the inhabitants of a suburb or the groups of people who supposedly cause the problems. The 'solution' implemented does not appear in a particularly clear-cut way. In addition, none of the elements which normally compose a policy find support from all actors. They are, however, continuously discussed by local actors via the meetings that take place. This illustrates that the basis of public action is fragmented within territories and in terms of representation. The lack of comparability of these local contexts constrains attempts by the Association to standardize practices and create a policy which would capture these.

The case study shows that the Agency did not relay the attempt by the Association to standardize coordination practices and to extend the model of local agencies funded by all partners. Rather, as has been said, the Agency chose to normalize the profession. This implies that standards and directives are norms that are used in parallel, for any given object, by two different organizations which could both be described as institutions. There is a hierarchy between the standards and directives tools and the organizations which handle them, reflecting two different classes of action. (In other words, the scope of the problems and actions undertaken by the Agency is wider.)

Position and powers within a policy community

The leaders of the Association regard it as a 'public' body. Their message is in tune with the message that the Ministry of Home Affairs has in fact disseminated since the early 1980s. This message is that crime control is best achieved through the coordination of all State and other local services. The Association also has a point, which is that a lot of the delinquency and insecurity develops during the hours of night. In addition, the 'public policy' it set up addresses three things simultaneously: crime, insecurity and employment. It is therefore in tune with the priorities of the (then) socialist government. The managers of the Association could be said to combine the expertise both of the practitioner and the agent.

In spite of the resources mentioned above, the Agency limits access to the Committee. Control of the composition and functioning of the Committee appears to be critical since it helped to put local practices back into their context. Officials of the Agency were able to circumvent the obligatory information they in addition were looking for. They organized 'public hearings' in order to be able to proceed to their own evaluation. Such a procedure formalizes the presentation of local practices. In a context of generalized networking, information is both highly volatile and often not specific. During public hearings, local actors are tied to the context of their status and are

asked to make clear the local conditions which explain their actions. The social capital of officials compensated for the lack of knowledge about local issues. Their contacts are used to meet formally with the relevant actors, as much as to find people who could serve as consultants in order to evaluate local actions. Furthermore, the Committee resembles a policy community. People are good acquaintances of one another, having met and kept on meeting despite diverging professional careers. The setting up of working groups or committees, as well as the selection of people for the hearings, is often based on this high level of connectedness between a small number of people who are either civil servants, researchers or consultants, members of ministerial cabinets, or heads of associations.

In addition, the official who chaired the meetings followed an agenda that was independent from Association concerns. The Agency makes a distinction between 'genuine new occupations' and marginal functions which are exerted as part of existing professions. Night-warden mediation is seen as an example of the latter. The Agency seeks to improve genuine new occupations rather than professionalize them. In this sense, it has a more narrow focus, but looks for a more general implementation and a greater effectiveness. Working on existing professionalized occupations and State services ensures that new regulations will be applied in a uniform way across cities, through the direct line of command which national administrations have with their decentralized services. Working out the details of a new profession is, on the contrary, less effective because the impact and scope of these practices is not yet evaluated beyond a few specific localities.

A policy network perspective assumes that a certain amount of power is attached to a position and depends on the number of structural gaps in the set of relations around it (Burt 1995). In this interpretation, each position is specific and power is not transitive, it can not be shared. The Association, then, would have moved to a good position at the expense of the Agency. What we observe here is that the possibility for the Association to take part in policy-making is not concomitant with a loss of influence of the Agency. Rather, the Agency demonstrates that it has the capacity to structure the space of negotiation. Secondly, it dedicates its resources to other objectives. It does not have the same time horizon. The objective of policy continuity places it at another level of the game, even though it remained dependent on the platform where stakeholders deliberate. In this respect, the concept of network creates confusion between two levels of the game: a structured organizational field on the one hand and a policy community on the other. Whereas it appears possible to gain influence by standardizing practices, access to the policy community remains limited. Ideas and social capital, valuable as they may be, are not sufficient resources to access it.

Continuity and consistency across territories and sectors

'Public action' places the Association and the Agency in a similar framework of action. This concept, as incorporated by the leaders of the Association in

their 'theory' of the misfits between local policies and social demand for night-warden intervention, shows that a common outlook is shared by organizations which belong to different levels. Local practices of coordination and constitutive interventions by national administrations are evaluated and discussed by all from the point of view of the legitimacy of public action (opportunity, responsibilities and effectiveness). However, the formulation of the problem, the definition of the recipients and of actions are not simply left to discussions with stakeholders. They are coined in a top-down sense by the Agency which thereby responds to specific imperatives of continuity, consistency and cross-sectoral validity which in turn have a bearing on its action. Its time horizon, scope of action and modes of theorization discriminate the Agency, then, and its relation to public action.

The Agency has launched many different programmes, under various circumstances, often under pressure from governments, and has created a collection of measures at the local level. It now manages programmes concerning mediators, the professionalization of local councillors, the reform of public services for more effective night-duties, the renovation of council housing accommodation, and so on. Measures from the various programmes are evaluated, then followed-up or carried over to the local level. At the local level, initiatives coordinating these programmes appear and reveal the limits of the carrying over process. The response to these initiatives is incorporated into the management of national programmes.

The Agency is required to respond to local initiatives because its previous programmes have affected local actions, which in turn modify the outcomes of these programmes. This implies interaction between the Agency and local players. Local players seek guidance, while national public authorities need information concerning the outcomes of local action. National administration officials spend time contacting local players and maintaining contacts through seminars, workshops, phone calls, and so on. In this manner, they cover the whole territory and identify local initiatives. These initiatives are then evaluated by consultants or researchers assigned by the Agency. Results are then publicized, through publications or seminars, to see whether their dissemination should be encouraged and whether they reveal a social demand for action across territories. In contrast to the Association, which only accepts members which follow certain standards, the Agency deals with all territories and all actors. Comparability is a far more difficult cognitive challenge in this respect. Since it deals with urban policies, a public organization such as the Agency does work with the outcome of many different and intricate decisions and policies. Creating consistency out of this set of actions is a specific challenge for a national administration. Furthermore, it is an interdepartmental organization, which, for most of the decision-making process, needs to set up working groups, which gather representatives of all departments involved. Transversality also presents difficulties since current practices include the avoidance of mutual cooperation, fragmentation, partitioning and by-passing (Hayward and Wright 2002).

The necessity to remain informed about local developments and to meet the demands of groups subordinated to the decisions requires substantive and flexible resources. National administrations have only indirect links with those undertaking local experiments, and are obliged to gather at least some data which describe the application of their decisions within these experiments. Empirically speaking, central administrations are dependent upon the command and publication of reports by their research department or consultants. Furthermore, they need to wait for the conclusion of the experiments in order to be able to avail themselves of the expertise of those carrying them out.

The promotion of new modes of public action based on experimentation and exchange of practice poses the question of how to decentralize decision making (in terms both of data collection and evaluation of locally implemented programmes) and make it autonomous at the same time. Ambiguously enough, public authorities such as the Agency need to avail themselves of the resources offered by stakeholders – such as professional organizations – while maintaining these under their appropriate status as subordinates. Overall, the Agency is heavily dependent of the existence of an interorganizational network. Institutions have the obligation to act and cannot step back from a policy community which is structured around their participation. The network of dependencies around them is tighter than it is around associations. For associations, the participation in national committees helps them keep their resources (acquaintance with local actors and expertise of local practices) in line with their mission (to present and defend best local practices in the face of national decision-makers). National administrations on the other hand must exist in a situation where there is a misfit between their functional attributes (a mandate given by a government to coordinate the sector-related policies which impact on urban areas) and structural attributes (the obligation to prepare ministerial decisions, personnel turnover among elected principals and dependency over representatives of local actors or professionals for assessing the outcomes of their decisions).

Action is therefore constrained on both sides. The mandate given by principals may vary according to the given governmental context. Election times in particular are likely to raise some debates and launch some new process of structuring problems. In this respect, local implementation of programmes and the launching of policy initiatives are partly decoupled from the recurrent emergence of problems that are tackled at an extremely high level of abstraction (matters of risks and safety in particular). Public authorities fall between abstract formulation of the problems and the multiplicity of expressions of these problems. They are constrained by the fact that they have to demonstrate the ability to tackle a problem whenever it is put back on the public agenda, while at the same time the evaluation of local actions are to a large extent owned by other actors. Continuity thus places public organizations in a double-bind: they are meant to collect data from all actors all of which possess some, and come of which sometimes try to exert more

influence than their position would indicate (an example here being the leaders of the Association). At the same time, the resources possessed by public associations and the instructions received from principals force them to prioritize some problems.

In response to this, national administrations do have the means to set out platforms in which interactions may be intensive but agendas and actions are distinct. Networking with local actors familiar with the evaluation process allows the appropriate placement of local players into the position of subordinates. While local actors are helped by guidelines, the Agency then finds the right moment for the adoption of new programmes that enhance the impact of regulations. The creation of an intermediate structure is also used in order to create a committee or an independent agency; this agency, charged with the task of creating a network of local players and consulting stakeholders, helps to draw the needed resources from these actors while keeping enough room around the decision makers for pursuing specific objectives and regulate the same stakeholders. However, some legal hurdles do exist: how to create an organization endowed with legal personality; the mechanisms to secure the accountability and the independence of this new organization; the powers delegated to it, and so on. Furthermore, such agencies are at arm's length from the decision makers; this makes it too remote to be entirely controlled but makes it easier for interest groups to 'capture' it. Hence, there is a possibility here that deviant actors can enter the game, something that cannot be dismissed. The tools are available but the challenge of positioning stakeholders at the appropriate level remain.

CONCLUSION

The case study discussed here makes the case for investigating the issue of how national administrations manage to assert their position in the face of more intense interactions with organizations which can claim both expertise and representativeness. The specificity of the case study implies that our findings are reproducible: most of what we observed is linked to the personal strategies of political entrepreneurs, which go beyond the role they can be expected to play. With regard to the neo-institutionalist assumption that norms and rules permeate institutional fields and that deviance is rare, the existence of entrepreneurs who try to access networks is quite outstanding. The analysis of these actors' strategies is difficult however since they control the access of the researcher to certain arenas as well as to information, including biographical information.

The concept of public action adequately highlights the fact that there is an overall problematic of opportunity and scope for collective action, something which institutions, private organizations, stakeholders and public interest groups deal with together. This case pleads for a public action perspective which takes account of the fact that although the opportunity, effectiveness and responsibilities in public action are issues open to consultation and negotiation among public and private actors, the structuring of action

(including issues to be addressed, recipients of programmes, tools to be used) is the object of specific strategies from national administrations. The capacity to implement such strategies in the case described depended on variables such as the acquaintance with local actors and initiatives – for this influences the capacity to meet demands and compare territories – or the organizing of consultation procedures – for this affects the possibility of sidelining certain actors, and so on. The publicness of institutional action in any case remains a bone of contention. That public organizations heed this shows that political authority matters.

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