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## Conference Abstract

### **Pursuing community ownership in local service design and delivery: challenging the boundaries of professional long-term care?**

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## Abstract

In pursuing person-centredness and cost containment in long-term care, policy makers and academics stress the importance of public participation and co-production with communities. When citizen involvement is interpreted as increasing their ownership over local care arrangements – either meant literally or as a sense of being in control – it potentially affects the roles of professional and community actors beyond a mere redistribution of responsibilities. While the issue has become a core concern in both policy and academic debates, not much is known about what it means for professional care organizations when profound strategic influence of citizens is pursued. This paper draws on 18 months of ethnographic field work, studying representatives of a professional care organization negotiating the design and delivery of services with inhabitants of a small town in the north of the Netherlands. Looking at attempts to transform a ‘traditional’ professional care home into a joint initiative of professional and community actors, I focus on how the various actors involved draw different symbolic boundaries between what they see as ‘professional’ and ‘community’ domains and their corresponding roles. As such notions are malleable and change over time, I explore how their evolving meaning affects – and is affected by – the degree of actual ownership that citizens experience over local care service delivery.

The case study reveals some of the complexities of attempting to achieve higher levels of community ownership over activities traditionally dominated by professional organizations. On one hand, a substantial boundary shift took place by opening up space for citizens to negotiate issues that were initially decided for them. Still, it was a common reflex for organizational representatives to impose barriers when citizens actually tried to exert influence. Although boundaries seemed to be shifting, they did not disappear; professional actors struggled to reconcile ‘letting go’ to enable meaningful participation, with ‘staying in control’ to meet organizational requirements. Some dealt with this tension by clearly demarcating the domain in which citizen involvement was deemed possible and desirable. Others instead engaged in blurring organizational boundaries by – actively or passively – involving citizens in adjusting ‘internal’ policies and processes to accommodate local needs or preferences. These two approaches resembled different ways in which the organization’s relation to citizens was characterized. When emphasizing citizens’ role as client-consumer or volunteer for the organization, they were granted less strategic agency than when portraying them as ‘equal partners’ in designing and delivering local care services.

This study sheds light on how different perspectives on community engagement evolve and interact when attempting to transform the relationship between professional care organizations and the communities they work with. It shows how such attempts can potentially lead to fundamental questions about who defines the boundaries of the professional organization and how far citizens' strategic agency can go. Whereas the current paper focuses on how actors redraw and give meaning to such boundaries during the start-up of a joint initiative, future research is required for investigating how such dynamics evolve as the initiative matures.

## **Keywords**

**citizen involvement; co-production; ownership; boundaries; organizational change**

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## **PowerPoint presentation**

<http://integratedcarefoundation.org/resource/icic15-presentations>