Circuiting parents’ voice: Parenting discussion groups and institutional healing in northeast Paris

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Abstract
The discussion group is a common form of parenting support offered by associations in the pluri-ethnic, working-class neighborhoods of northeast Paris. Situated in a larger formation of voice that hails marginalized parents to speak, professionals engage with these discussion groups as potential social ‘transistors’: simultaneously circuiting parents’ voice inwards to restore parents’ agentive capacities and amplifying it outwards into an audible collective voice aimed at impacting state–citizen relations. In order to reach this double effect, professionals deploy ‘paralinguistic techniques’, which produce and combine intimate and civic, normative and alternative (semi-)public speech contexts. As a result, discussion groups emerge as pedagogical instances of a ‘Republican’ public sphere and its reworkings. Against the backdrop of anxieties of a disintegrating Republic and failing institutions, discussion groups highlight a desire for new conduits of citizenship, as well as the ways in which marginalized residents are called upon to invest these with their voice.

Keywords
Empowerment, participative citizenship, voice, public sphere, institutions, urban governance, parenting support, France
Introduction

On a winter evening, cold and dark, some 20 people have gathered in a community center in one of the working-class neighborhoods in northeast Paris. Ten youths and a handful of parents, all of Sub-Saharan or Maghrebi African origin, sit around the tables in the middle of the drab room. Joined by community organizers of the center, and an invited legal expert and street social worker, they share a meal of take-away pizzas and sodas. The evening is part of the monthly discussion group (*groupe de parole*) for parents run by the center’s family worker, Fatima, and an affiliated family therapist, Ori. The latter interrupts the informal chit-chat to initiate another, more public form of talk and listening. The goal of the evening, so he explains, is to have a discussion of the law and to benefit from the knowledge of the invited legal expert. Ori and Fatima have organized similar debates before, which resulted in lively conversations on the rights of youths and parents vis-a-vis police practices or family court rulings. In this neighborhood suffering from regular police raids, drug dealing, and high drop-out rates, the law translates easily into concrete questions.

Inviting people to bring-up whatever is on their mind, Ori, Fatima and the legal expert look around encouragingly. An awkward silence follows. Then Fatima, a seasoned community organizer, raises a question that she knows will resonate: what if a 16-year-old child tells his parents he’s going to quit school? Can he do that, and what is the risk if he does? Her example does the trick of ‘liberating speech’ (*libérer la parole*), as professionals call it. Sharing anecdotes about insulting teachers, negligent after-school activity workers and degrading school rulings, the parents and youths start to speak.

The discussion group is one of the most common forms of parenting support in France. In the impoverished and ethnically diverse northeastern boroughs of Paris where I conducted my fieldwork, *groupes de parole* for parents were ubiquitous. They were run by community centers, by neighborhood associations, by psychological services, by social workers, and by non-profit organizations offering homework tutoring. The envisaged public of these organizations and initiatives were the mostly migrant-background families living in the working-class neighborhoods (*quartiers populaires*) or in the strongly stigmatized social housing high-rises (*cités*). Many of these discussion groups led a faltering life, and professionals and city officials regularly complained to me about the difficulty of getting discussion groups to work. Nevertheless, the importance of having discussion groups, and getting parents to talk, seemed beyond question.

I argue that the prevalence of discussion groups for parents in marginalized urban areas is indicative of a particular ‘formation of voice’ (Kunreuther, 2009: 547). Kunreuther describes the formation of voice as a set of ‘hailing practices, patterns of speech, and talk about who speaks and who should be called to speak’ (2009: 557). It links voice, personhood and agency in particular ways, producing gendered, classed, and racialized ‘divisions of speech and action’ (2009: 546). The formation of voice I examine here revolves around the basic assumption...
that parents in working-class neighborhoods, and especially migrant-background mothers, have to be guided towards taking up more ‘participatory’, public forms of voice. Discussion groups for parents form a space where this hailing to speech is put into practice in very concrete ways.

To the professionals with whom I worked, getting marginalized parents to talk in discussion groups was not an objective in and of itself. They viewed helping parents to regain a (public) voice as a means towards a larger social aim: to counter institutional violence and create a more equal and inclusive society. In this paper, I examine how professionals sought to circuit the speech and voice of marginalized parents, by way of discussion groups, to have an effect of institutional healing and engendering a new kind of public sphere. Their engagement with the discussion group as a potentially transformative node of voice – a social transistor, as I call it – brings to the fore a broader governance question haunting postcolonial France. How to connect individual citizens into new collectives, and circuit them from the private sphere into a new, more wholesome public?

The confession and the transistor

The hailing to speech of parents of marginalized neighborhoods touches upon three literatures.

First, ethnographies of French parenting support policy have pointed out the accentuated role of speech and talk (Giuliani, 2014; Pothet, 2015; Roux and Vozari, 2018). They show that professionals direct parents to talk transparently about themselves (Giuliani, 2014) or take-up a reflexive stance towards the self through particular ways of verbalizing feelings (Pothet, 2015; Roux and Vozari, 2018). In this line of analysis, getting parents to talk about themselves is a governmental technique. It engages parents in a self-governing relation of self-to-self (Memmi, 2003: 448; Rose, 1999), and in that sense responsibilizes individual parents and de-politicizes social problems (Neyrand, 2011).

A second body of literature attends to the governance of the non-white urban poor. It argues that welfare reform and neoliberal urban governance, and the concomitant discourses of empowerment and participation, have put the burden of responsibilization primarily on non-white, impoverished urban populations, who are increasingly penalized and policed (Cruikshank, 1999; Dubois, 2009; Wacquant, 2010). Ethnographies of house visits by welfare officials (Dubois, 2014), or of obligatory group therapy in a drug treatment program (Carr, 2011), show how professionals try to get impoverished clients to talk truthfully about themselves and to ‘confess’ (Carr, 2011: 94; Dubois, 2014: 50). In a context of welfare retrenchment, so these authors argue, clients’ speech is used as a tool to assess deservingness, and as an object of reform. Professionals focus on helping clients become ‘responsible’ subjects by reconfiguring their relationship to language (Carr, 2011: 3; cf. Dubois, 2014: 53), rather than address the social problems from which they suffer.
A third body of literature attends to the cooptation of the ideals of empowerment and participation within policy agendas, and the impact this has on the work of local associations and activist organizations. Community organizers and associations increasingly have to work within conditions and frameworks set by policy makers (Bassel and Emejulu, 2017; Nicholls, 2006). As a result, these authors argue, the meaning of empowerment has shifted from fostering resistance to the production of responsible citizens and communities (Eliasoph, 2011; De Wilde and Duyvendak, 2016).

Despite their theoretical differences, these three literatures each emphasize the limited social and political reach of speech generated in governance encounters in the name of empowerment or participation. Or, more precisely, they argue that there is a profound political and social effect to such speech, but in the sense that it circulates back inwards, responsibilizing the individuals or communities hailed to talk or to participate.

The hopes and practices that professionals and other actors invested in discussion groups for parents, however, were structured by a different imagination of the circuiting of speech and its effects. To be sure, discussion groups were meant to ‘constitut[e] citizens out of subjects’ (Cruikshank, 1999: 67) by hailing parents to speak. But this making of citizens was also to generate an outward effect of forging a collective energy aimed at institutional healing and a new, more inclusive public sphere. In order to take account of this imagination of a conduit of citizenship that connects inward subjectivation and outward social change, I propose a different metaphor than that of the confession.

I argue that the discussion group was hoped to function as a social transistor. In electrical circuits, a transistor is a semiconductor device with two potential functions: it can act both as a switch and as an amplifier of electrical power. Similarly, professionals tried to create the discussion group as a space that allows cité parents to find their voice and thus to switch their voice from ‘off’ to ‘on’, to then amplify the collective speech generated within the group into an audible voice in the public sphere that, in turn, could change state–citizen relations.

Building on Carr (2011: 125), I call this circuiting work ‘paralinguistic labor’. Paralinguistic labor does not focus on how a person relates to language by disciplining what is said, but consists of techniques of addressing and reshaping the (classed, racialized, and gendered) context of speech. Self and social conditions are here understood as inextricably linked. Looking at these techniques in detail, I show that professionals evoked and produced a range of different ‘publics’, both in the sense of intended audiences for parents’ speech and in the sense of imaginations of what constitutes an inclusive, viable public sphere.

The nature of the public sphere has been central to the heated debates of immigration and the future of the Republic in postcolonial France (Bowen, 2007; Chabal, 2015). Republicanism can be understood as the idea that the state and the law are the expression of the common good and the general will of the people. The public sphere here has a specific meaning and role. It denotes a space where individuals transcend and ‘abstract’ themselves from their differences and private
interests so that they can interact as equal, individual citizens (Bowen, 2007: 14; Epstein, 2011: 22; Favell, 2001: 81–85). The state is the guarantor of this ‘neutral’ public sphere (Bowen, 2007: 20). It should address citizens only in their abstracted capacity to ensure equality and freedom. It should ensure, historically via the public school, the creation of citizens capable of such abstracting (Bowen, 2007: 12).

In the face of postcolonial diversity and deepening socioeconomic fissures, however, the bridging function of Republican institutions is seen to falter. The merits and boundaries of ‘Republican’ public space are continuously questioned and reworked. Especially in the ethnically diverse cité, the Republic’s capacity to create a neutral, cohesive public sphere is felt to be threatened, whether by the effects of social exclusion and inequality, or by communautarisme (citizens turning inwards into their ethnic or religious communities), a lack of social mixité (mixing), or Islamism (Bowen, 2007; Epstein, 2011). This has been addressed by new laws aimed at reinforcing Republican values, such as the bans on the headscarf or face-veil (Bowen, 2007: 29–31; Fernando, 2010). At the same time, progressive policies and activist movements striving for democratic participation in the banlieue (Tissot, 2007), institutional modernization (Ion, 2005; Payet and Purenne, 2016) or more inclusive visions of Frenchness (Bassel, 2014; Chabal, 2015: 186–208) work to redefine the nature of state–citizen relationships and the place of difference in the public sphere.

I argue that professionals aspired for the discussion group to function as a new kind of healing semi-public space that is able to do what state institutions no longer can: to bring together and transform simultaneously individual citizens and the state itself towards the common good of a more equal society. They do so by deploying paralinguistic techniques that craft the discussion group into a safe space for practicing at once normative versions of what Republican citizenship is now and alternative versions of what Republican citizenship could be. The discussion group emerges as a pedagogical instance of a ‘Republican’ public sphere that reflects these political contestations and redefinitions.

**A formation of voice: Reconnecting ‘distant’ parents and institutions**

In the early 2000s, Didier Fassin (2004) noted how the problem of exclusion had been redefined as a problem of social suffering which was to be redressed by offering empathetic listening (écoutes) to the excluded. In the years since his analysis, the formation of voice in which working-class neighborhood residents find themselves has changed. Now, they are diagnosed with a lack of self-esteem, trust, and agentive autonomy making them ‘distant’ (éloignés) from state institutions. The latter increasingly position themselves as actively welcoming and recognizing citizens’ participation and voice (Payet et al., 2008). Exclusion and inequality
resurface here as maladies of agency and trust (Tissot, 2007). To redress these, the excluded need not so much to be listened to, but to regain a capacity to speak. If the cité youth was at the center of the politics of listening that Fassin described, it is increasingly the figure of the deprived, migrant-background parent that is hailed in the politics of giving participative, institutional voice. This is the result of two intersecting policy developments and political preoccupations.

First, the state and social welfare services have been seeking to reconfigure their previously antagonistic relation to the family. This is an ongoing process that is related to the introduction of parentalité as a governance domain (Becquemin and Robin, 2016: 66). Historically, the French state sought to make citizens out of children in opposition to the domestic sphere. Instead, the relatively new policy ideals of ‘co-éducation’ and of ‘proximate’ and ‘symmetrical’ governance stipulate that schools and social services need to work together with parents and develop, rather than by-pass, their parental role (Breviglieri, 2005; Giuliani, 2014; Martin, 2015; Payet and Purenne, 2016; Sas-Barondeau, 2014). France’s first national parenting support policy measure, the REAAP (Réseaux d’Écoute, d’appui et d’accompagnement des parents), expressed this orientation. It provides project-funds for local, bottom-up collective actions that allow parents to share experiences and support each other. It accords to parents a participative role on equal footing with professionals and partnering institutions (Campéon et al., 2014). All the discussion groups I participated in were partly funded through REAAP.

Second, although parenting support policy started off in explicitly universalistic terms, it has become increasingly inflected by worries over school failure, youth delinquency, and the wavering hold of institutions in pluri-ethnic, marginalized urban areas (Martin, 2015; Pothet, 2014). This urban problematic has been addressed through a penal approach of enforcing order (Dikeç, 2011; Fassin, 2013). But it has also been addressed by an urban policies approach that focused, instead, on repairing and healing ‘social ties’ and trust, both between residents and between residents and institutions. Forming a testing grounds for the modernization of public governance in general, this urban policy relied on residents’ ‘participation’ in the regeneration of neighborhood life and local democracy (Tissot, 2007).

As a result of the convergence of the policy domains of parentalité and inequality, multiple measures have been added to France’s parenting support policy which aim to guide (implicitly working-class and/or migrant-background) parents towards taking up a more active role in their children’s education. This includes punitive measures calling parents to their ‘parental responsibility’ in case of truancy or delinquency (Martin, 2015; Pothet, 2014, 2015). Vice versa, Parisian urban and anti-poverty policies have started to emphasize the need to ‘accompany’ parents who are ‘distant’ from institutions in order to prevent juvenile delinquency and school failure. Parisian authorities have also developed programs that are to ‘bring closer’ (rapprocher) parents and schools; and they have initiated a range of fora, public meetings, and surveys, in order to ground policy measures in the perspectives and capacities of parents themselves.
In practice, these different policies translate in a predominant hailing of mothers. Despite the use of the gender-neutral ‘parents’, parenting support activities in France tend to reach and involve women (Sas-Barondeau, 2014: 203). The banlieue and its Muslim populations are situated, moreover, within colonial histories in which migrant and Muslim women have been targeted as crucial symbols in the maintenance of ‘French principles of public order’ (Surkis, 2010: 555). Anxieties about communautarisme and Islam in the banlieues link migrant populations and especially Muslims to a problem of ‘sexism’ that is perceived to threaten the ‘Republican’ principles of gender equality and individual freedom (Bowen, 2007; Fernando, 2010; Robcis, 2015; Scott, 2005). Muslim women figure in these discourses as silenced and oppressed victims, trapped in the private sphere and sexist gender roles by their male kin and community (Guénif-Soulamas, 2006). Although these discourses rarely surface in the policies described above, they provide a common-sense framing of Muslim and migrant-background women as in particular need of regaining voice and emancipation from the domestic/communal sphere.

In addition, there is a French governance tradition of seeking to bring (post) colonial migrant communities into the national fold by supporting mothers (Lyons, 2006, 2009). Early welfare services for (Algerian) migrant families in France provided group courses and home visits to instruct mothers in modern home economics, child rearing and welfare bureaucracies. They focused specifically on mothers as a way to ‘penetrate’ the domestic sphere and instill modern values and loyalty to France in the Algerian community (Lyons, 2006: 492).

The discussion groups on which I focus in this paper are thus situated within a larger formation of voice. This larger formation of voice is shaped by anxieties about a presumed disconnect between Republican institutions and particular urban spaces, and a desire to bring supposedly ‘distant’ and muted subjects into a public sphere of citizenship. It exists of multiple, divergent political discourses and reform projects that seek to redress the crisis of a fissured Republic. It is also historically linked to gendered colonial and paternalistic governance traditions. In this larger formation, migrant-background cité parents, and especially mothers, are called to speak and participate in institutions on multiple accounts: as parents, as cité residents, as ‘distant’ parents of children with difficulties in school, as ‘oppressed’ Muslim women. Institutional actors also need for them to speak. Here, ‘the invitation to speak … can morph into an obligation’ (Payet and Laforgue, 2008: 20, my translation).

Local associations

The work of repairing social ties, reconciling families and schools, and getting marginalized parents to take up their participative role in institutions has been largely assigned to local third-sector actors, or associations. Community centers (centres sociaux) have a prominent role among these. Due to the way in which parenting support policy is financed and framed, community centers and local
associations are also the main actors providing voluntary parenting support activities (Sas-Barondeau, 2014: 197). In Paris’ northeastern arrondissements, where the majority of the city’s ‘priority’ neighborhoods and the majority of parenting support initiatives are concentrated, a dense landscape of such associations exists.

Broadly understanding their work as battling against inequality, these associations referred to the principles of *éducation populaire* – a French activist empowerment movement with a variegated history (Bacqué and Bieuwener, 2013; Chateignier, 2012) – in order to distinguish their approach from more institutional actors. Associations usually offered a range of (free) group-based activities for and with local residents, such as homework tutoring, activities and outings for youths and families, debates, neighborhood feasts, and communal gardens. Parenting support actions were not their core business, but were one activity among many aimed at promoting neighborhood ‘solidarity’, ‘mixing’, ‘intergenerational ties’, and residents’ ‘autonomy’. Parenting support here was thus not so much focused on parenting practices or ‘parenting styles’ (cf. Faircloth, 2013), but sought to summon residents, especially women, to be sociable and involved in institutions as parents, thus crafting parenthood into a broad ‘citizenship posture’ (Sas-Barondeau, 2014: 197, my translation).

The position of professionals working in associations was far from secure (Fassin, 2004: 75–76). Many were hired on temporary, part-time or government subsidized contracts. Associations depended on professionals’ capacity to successfully bid to, and combine, multiple short-term and constantly changing project subsidies and funds. A significant portion of the professionals that I met, especially those working in community centers, had a migrant background and were raised in the *banlieues*, in a social context not too different from that of the *cité* families with whom they worked.

In 2017, I conducted 10 months of fieldwork with professionals running parenting support activities within this associational milieu in the northeast of Paris. In three community centers, a *ludothèque*, and a psychological association, I followed family workers and other professionals during their daily routines. I participated in activities organized for parents (among which 17 discussion group meetings), in team meetings, and local professional networks. These participatory observations were supplemented with 42 interviews, including with school social workers, psychologists, and officials involved in policy development.

My position during discussion group meetings was ambivalent. I often took-up a semi-professional role: arriving early, helping with preparing. Professionals also asked me, however, to reciprocate by actively participating. I did so, drawing on my experience as a mother in a diverse neighborhood in Amsterdam. Although I did talk with them informally, I have not interviewed parents. My analysis is thus confined to the perspectives of professionals.

**A local ideology of speech, institutions, and self**

In her work on a US drug treatment program, Summerson Carr (2011) analyses the way in which professionals regulate and script clients’ speech during obligatory
group therapy as a ‘distillery’ of a dominant ideology of language and personhood (126). In her case, this was the idea that a healthy, responsible self can be achieved only through the transparent referencing and ‘owning up’ of inner emotional states (150). I argue that professionals’ imagination of discussion groups as potential social transistors also brings out ideas about the relationship between speech, self, and society. In contrast to Carr’s case, however, discussion groups ‘distil’ a language ideology that is dominant only in a specific activist and governance milieu. Moreover, this is an ideology that views the circuiting of speech and its healing or detrimental effects as inextricably linked not to the inner self, but to institutional and social context.

I draw my ethnographic examples from two projects. The way in which each of these projects was set up, and the effects that professionals aspired to generate through them, bring out different elements of this local ideology and the transistor metaphor.

The first project is the discussion group mentioned in the ‘Introduction’ section. The community center organizing this discussion group had been founded in the wake of residents’ activism for a right to proper housing. Many of its paid staff, among whom Fatima, the family worker running the discussion group, had worked at the center for a considerable time (10 years or longer). As a result, the center had an activist and locally embedded profile. Fatima recounted that she had organized a discussion group for quite some time, when at a certain moment, a group of mothers had actively sought out the center’s help. They struggled with keeping their children in school and out of drug traffic and street crime. To answer their request, Fatima refocused the discussion group on issues of adolescence. When increasingly complex problems of domestic violence and delinquency surfaced, Ori was contracted to co-host the discussion group.6 Ori had extensive experience with this problematic after a windy career that had taken him from being an interim social worker in youth care institutions to being a family therapist.7

The discussion group meetings were held once a month and were usually attended by a small group of mothers, who were invited to talk freely without an agenda set in advance. Fatima and Ori also organized larger meetings on particular topics, such as the one on the law described in the opening vignette. For these, they invited experts that could answer parents’ questions about the school, the police or the justice system in more detail. These meetings drew a slightly larger crowd, including several youths and fathers.

Fatima infused her work with a critical aspiration that is based on a particular understanding of cause and effect in relation to the power of speech. Her analysis of the cause of conflicts between migrant parents and institutions like the school is illustrative of the local professional discourse. Reflecting on the conversations she had had with parents, she told me:

One of the first things I realized is that all these people, all these parents, they have capacities and know-how, but that that has been trampled over by the social workers, by the so-called ‘family-experts’ or ‘parenting-experts’. And, as a result, they feel
erased (effacés). Some of them [feel]: pfft, we don’t know anything [about parenting], it’s they [the experts] who know. Even though that is not true!

She illustrated this with a range of anecdotes. A principal telling a mother that she should ‘learn how to educate her children’. Parents publically chided in front of their children during school disciplinary councils. Social workers reprimanding non-French-speaking parents for being impolite and uneducated when they do not use the formal vouvoiement, which was something that Fatima remembered struggling with herself when she migrated as a student from Morocco. Similar anecdotes were repeatedly told to me by other professionals.

In the local professional ideology, deprived and migrant parents are suffering from a lack of confidence and autonomy. However, the cause of this lack is understood to be located in institutions, or rather, in wounding authoritarian institutional speech acts from professionals to parents. It is the stigmatizing and ‘culpabilizing’ way in which institutional professionals speak to deprived migrant parents, that damages parents’ self-esteem and erodes their agentive capacity in institutional settings.

The hope is that by re-initiating speech in the intimate setting of the discussion group, the destructive effect of hierarchical, institutional hailing can be healed and parent’s agency restored. The most-mentioned aims of discussion groups are to help parents ‘feel less alone’ and to restore their self-confidence, especially vis-a-vis institutions. The idea is that sharing experiences and trying to find solutions together will enable parents to realize that the difficulties they face are not caused by their lacking capacities, but are social problems.

Re-finding a public voice was perceived to be a slow, step-by-step process that is started in the discussion group, but which ideally extends beyond it so as to allow parents to speak and act in newly agentive and assertive ways in institutional encounters. This is well illustrated by the second project from which I draw my examples.

This a Université Populaire des Parents (UPP), which was run by another community center, located in a close-by but slightly more affluent neighborhood. This community center’s family worker, Estelle, had previously run a successful discussion group on the topic of the school. She rendered the ideal-typical, gradual impact of the speech generated in the discussion group as follows:

At first it is: I want to go to a group, but I don’t speak. Many don’t speak, they just listen. But: I’m there, I have made the effort, I’ve come. The time after that: I will talk [in the group]. […] Then, maybe the next meeting, it’s me who suggests a topic, or who does the talking. […] Then, because I am heard [in the group], I know that I have the capacities to be able to go and talk. And I will go to the teacher to say directly what I have been wanting to say for such a long time!

Just as the detrimental power of hierarchical institutional hailing is imagined to reach down deep into the intimate realm of parents’ sense of self-worth, so the
healing force of the semi-public and horizontal speech and listening generated in
the discussion group is meant to travel back, slowly, to recreate individual parents’
voice within the public realm of the institutional encounter.

Estelle went on to describe another, more far-reaching, social effect that she
envisioned a discussion group could ultimately engender:

... and when I have the strength to continue in that direction, and I feel valorized
enough, I can go to the parent representative association [in the school]. And after
that, I can go talk to institutional partners, in a group, so that I don’t feel alone. With
the group with whom I have talked, I can even go and talk to politicians (élus).

This hopeful vision of the discussion group as potentially generating a collective
voice that could be amplified into the larger political and public arena was also
shared by Fatima. In fact, the notion that it is not individual parents, but ‘the
system’ itself that needs to change was implicit in much of professionals’ talk.

The desire to work simultaneously on local residents’ pouvoir d’agir (capacity to
act) and on changing institutions was as the basis of why Corinne, the director of
the second community center, had become enthusiastic about replacing Estelle’s
discussion group with a University for Parents (UPP). A UPP is a group of parents
who, with the help of a professional, and with the methodological aid of an aca-
demic researcher, carry out action-research on a self-chosen topic. The form of the
UPP was incepted in the early 2000s by a national association. The aim was to
counter the stereotypical discourse of cité parents as démissionnaire (disengaged
from educating their children) that had emerged in the wake of the 2005 banlieue
riots, and to have the voice of parents from working-class neighborhoods be heard.
This national association coordinates UPPs into a cohort that goes through a fixed
series of phases spanning a period of roughly three years: from the consolidation of
the group and the finding of a research theme, to the actual research phase, to the
dissemination of findings through ‘citizenship actions’ (actions citoyennes), and
culminating in the national presentation of the cohort’s research findings in a
high-profile setting.

Corinne had managed to secure the funding for this long-term project by com-
bining three different project subsidies. Nadine, in her early 30s, of mixed French-
Algerian descent and born and raised in the banlieue of Seine Saint-Denis, was
hired to ‘animate’ the UPP with the help of a consultant. At the time of my
fieldwork, Nadine had succeeded in bringing together a group of some 10 mothers
committed to the project. The participants came from divergent ethnic back-
grounds (Congo, Tunisia, Egypt, Italy, Cameroon, France). Whilst some were
recent migrants in the process of learning French and struggling with unemploy-
ment and precarious housing, others had more middle-class lifestyles and preoc-
cupations. UPP meetings, during which participating mothers talked about their
everyday lives so as to get to know each other and reflect on a possible theme for
their action-research, took place every month to two weeks.
Corinne described to me how previous attempts to create a public dialogue between governance actors and neighborhood parents had left her frustrated. She had come to the insight that, in order to heal the relationship between families and institutions: ‘We need to have a dialogue from collective to collective, not from an individual to an institution.’ The UPP, with its step-by-step program to craft a group of parents into a recognized interlocutor for institutions and politics, held precisely this promise of circuiting and amplify individual parents’ speech into an audible, collective voice capable of forging change.

In the remaining sections, I describe four techniques through which professionals tried to endow discussion groups with this double transistor-effect: circuiting simultaneously inwards to restore parents’ self-esteem, and outwards into a new collective voice of ‘working-class neighborhood parents’ with transformative power. These are paralinguistic techniques: they seek to initiate and conduit parents’ voice by focusing on the context of speech.

Although the discussion group run by Fatima and Ori and the UPP animated by Nadine were grounded in the same local ideology and transistor aspiration, they had different accents. Both projects sought to produce a particular kind of speech context during discussion groups, one that was both intimate enough to re-initiate speech (technique 1), but also instilled norms and conditions for civic, inclusive public interaction (technique 2). Fatima and Ori addressed the (racialized and classed) power dynamics of institutional speech contexts (technique 3) frequently and explicitly. The UPP, in contrast, was more focused on amplifying the public and institutional reach of a collective voice. To that end, Corinne and Nadine sought to meticulously stage instances of an alternative public speech context in which quartier parents and institutional actors could start to interact in new ways (technique 4).

Liberating speech: Fun and affect

Nadine had been busy preparing today’s UPP meeting. She had made a mind-map of the themes that emerged during earlier meetings and had arranged stacks of magazines, scissors, glue, and colored paper sheets. One after the other, 10 mothers arrived, with some bringing along their children. Nadine welcomed them with hugs and kisses, and engaged in informal chitchat over tea and coffee. Some of the mothers had brought friends or acquaintances along in the hope of enlarging the group. In order to introduce the participants to each other and create a relaxed and fun atmosphere, Nadine proposed to do a short game. Standing in a circle, everyone was to think of a hand gesture (waving, touching one’s ear) and tell their name to the group accompanied by the gesture. Nadine then asked the mothers to clap their hands in a rhythm and take turns re-enacting one of the gestures while trying to remember the associated name. The game elicited giggling and laughter, and most mothers smiled and chatted as they returned to sit around the table.

Nadine then handed out the mind-map she had made, inviting everyone to reflect on whether they agreed with her rendering, and whether there were topics
or themes that they felt were missing. She gently probed the people who did not talk spontaneously, making sure that everyone had a turn to speak. She then explained that they would be using the magazines to make mood boards that expressed who they are and their hopes for the future. While Nadine apologized for the lack of images figuring non-white and veiled women, the mothers started to cut and paste. At the end of the meeting, everyone, including Nadine, explained their mood board to the group. There was laughing and applause as some mothers talked about the successful school careers of their children, and empathic nodding as others talked about the loneliness of raising kids when husbands need to work day and night.

Although many associations ran discussion groups, very few of them were actually successful. Catering to a public of parents who often faced problems with housing, education, and employment and who lacked the means for child care, it was a challenge to find such parents willing and capable of freeing up their time to participate. Regularly, discussion group meetings drew fewer parents than professionals.

In order to persuade parents to participate as well as to ‘liberate’ their speech, professionals used a variety of practices that constituted the group as a space of horizontal conviviality. They paid ample attention to food and drinks (including attention to the cooking skills of the participating women), and used games and other ludic formats to create an informal, fun atmosphere. Through their interpellation of the body and the senses, food and games were also tools to get parents to start talking and interacting in other ways than those of a group discussion. These techniques play on mothers’ domestic and child-rearing roles, rendering the discussion group a deeply gendered homely space (De Wilde and Duyvendak, 2016).

Professionals invested in creating affective ties between themselves and parents, taking up a horizontal position next to, instead of above, parents. They took great care to remember and enquire about details in parents’ lives, participated alongside parents in activities, and often shared details of their own private lives. Professionals also worked to create intimate, affective ties between participating parents to create a sense of collectiveness. Nadine, for example, regularly proposed activities outside of the UPP meetings: going to a restaurant, dance lessons or a solidarity run together. In this way, she hoped to turn the group into a social network of friendship and solidarity independent of the meetings. In her words: to get parents to ‘live the group beyond the group’.

Through these techniques, professionals crafted the discussion group as a semi-public safe space. It is public in the sense that it brings together people who do not know each other in a communal space outside of the domestic sphere and in the presence of a professional. It is intimate in the convivial, horizontal, and affective ties that professionals sought to create. By bringing together these elements into an ‘intimate public’ space (Marchesi, forthcoming), professionals tried to produce a speech context in which the detrimental, stifling effects of institutional speech on parents’ self-esteem and voice could be healed and their speech could start to flow.
Regulating the group dynamic

Professionals created the group also as a civic semi-public space. Professionals directed parents to engage with each other along certain norms for public conduct, and sought to guarantee that different kinds of parents could find a place in it. This aspect of managing group interactions was what professionals called ‘imposing a framework (cadre)’. It required shifting from a horizontal positioning to a more explicitly professional position, as they mentioned rules and norms for interaction or intervened when a discussion threatened to become ‘unbalanced’. Nadine and Fatima, for example, repeated ever so often the ‘règles de vie’ of their respective groups. These were very similar: to listen to each other, to only speak and respond to the speech of others from one’s own lived experiences, and to not judge or tell fellow parents what to do.

Especially within the UPP-project, guiding parents to listen and speak in a respectful public manner was seen as a crucial component. Nadine had struggled for some time with one mother in particular. Of working-class, Italian background, this mother was opinionated and very engaged. She often took ‘a lot of space’, as Nadine put it, and tended to give others advice on how to handle their problems. While she tried to work on the ‘timidity’ of especially some of the Arab-speaking mothers through gentle encouragements, Nadine felt forced to take up a more directive position in relation to this mother. She reminded her of the rules mentioned above, or halted her so as to ‘distribute speech’ evenly across the group. Over the course of several months, however, Nadine noticed, and considered as an achievement, how the posture of the mother in question changed: while still talking a lot, she was now also listening and giving space to others to speak.

A second norm governing public speech in discussion groups was never explained as a rule, but enforced and co-produced by professionals and parents. This was the norm to not hail others in ethnic or ‘communitarian’ terms or to identify yourself exclusively in such terms. When a father of Western-African origin repeatedly talked about ‘African mothers’ during one of the meetings organized by Ori and Fatima, he was immediately corrected by Ori: ‘Monsieur, why do you keep insisting on this line of ‘African’ mothers?’ ‘Yes’, added a mother from Algerian background, ‘you cannot generalize’.

Creating a viable, civic public space where different parents could productively come together was also done by controlling the composition of the group. Professionals at times actively sought out certain persons to join the group and barred access to others. Nadine, for example, repeatedly tried to get a woman of Ivory-Coast origin to participate in the UPP. The woman had participated once and had commanded the visible respect of the other participants. Nadine hoped that this woman would be able to counter-balance a lingering conflict between two other big personalities, the previously mentioned Italian-origin mother and a white French middle-class mother. When a group of young Egyptian mothers wanted to join the group, however, Nadine strongly hesitated. Within the community center, complaints about Egyptian mothers’ perceived unwillingness to mix popped up regularly.
Echoing the ideal of a ‘balanced’ *mixité* (Epstein, 2011: 14) and fears of *communautarisme*, Nadine worried that their presence would undermine the cohesion and collective dynamic of the group. She and the other UPP participants, including several Egyptian-origin mothers who already participated, feared that they would use the UPP not for its proper, public end, but rather as an occasion to enjoy free food and socialize amongst themselves.

Regulating the group dynamic in these ways, professionals created discussion groups as a pedagogical instance of a civic public sphere of citizens interacting and coming together. On the one hand, this technique has a critical quality. It seeks to allow marginalized migrant-background parents to experience and practice partaking in public discussions as recognized citizens: being granted *écoute* and a space to speak, non-judgement, a valorization of ethnic and religious difference, a horizontal relation to professionals. On the other hand, this paralinguistic technique relies on more directive interventions by professionals, and reiterates a normative Republican understanding of the nature and rules of public life. ‘Public’ here doesn’t mean open to all. Professionals seek to craft the discussion group into a public space in the Republican sense: one that is neutral and inclusive because it is properly ‘mixed’, and because participants deliberate with one another as individual citizens capable of transcending their ethnic differences and private interests.

**A pedagogy of institutional speaking positions**

When parents started to talk in a discussion group, they often spoke about their negative personal experiences with institutions, the school in particular. They were also stimulated by professionals to do so. The ways in which professionals responded to these stories formed a pedagogy that instructed parents in the normative reality of institutional logics and parents’ classed and racialized position in these. But it also hinted at ways to effect change. To elucidate this, let us return to the debate on the law organized by Fatima and Ori.

During the debate, Ori and the legal expert sought to explain the regulations, procedures, and bureaucratic hierarchies involved in the questions and complaints that parents brought up. They informed them of the rights and formal obligations that they had as parents or pupils, and tried to explain as simply as possible the complicated bureaucratic steps they could take. Fatima, who was regularly solicited by parents to assist them in conflicts with the school or to accompany them to disciplinary hearings, was feverishly taking notes. Here, Fatima and Ori evoked the Republican ideal of citizen–institution relations as a domain regulated by universal and neutrally applied laws within which parents could seek protection from injustice as rights-bearing individuals.

In the recounting of how they were treated by teachers, social workers or the police, however, parents expressed a strong sense that their position vis-a-vis such institutional professionals was in reality determined by their being non-white ‘quartier’ residents. Fatima and Ori recognized and confirmed this sense of injustice. Often drawing on their own experiences as migrant-background parents, Ori and
Fatima stated that, yes, the police are often racist, and yes, some teachers are ‘cons’, and yes, there is a ‘social, and even a racial selection’, as Ori put it, in the way schools assign children from working-class neighborhoods to special-care or vocational schools. As they link individual parents’ difficulties together to institutional racism as an ‘undeniable reality’ in France, these remarks form a critical counter-narrative to the Republic’s claims to universality and neutrality.

However, Fatima and Ori also wanted to help parents with the problems they faced now and to guide them to pragmatic ways of dealing with institutional professionals. They conveyed institutional norms of parental involvement, and emphasized the racialized and classed weight that these gain due to the stereotypes of the parent démissionnaire or the criminal cité youth. They urged parents to actively seek contact with the school, and to always respond to teachers’ calls or requests for a meeting: because they are ‘migrant parents’ or ‘from the quartier’, teachers might be quick to dismiss them as uncaring and their children as lost cases. They advised youths not to resist police identity checks, however racist inspired they may be. ‘Yes, the school needs to change and evolve,’ Ori agreed with parents’ complaints. But he highlighted the school’s standardizing logic and its institutional power. ‘Some people want to change the school to their standards: that will never happen. The school never adapts to the child. It’s the child who adapts to the school.’

Emphasizing that ‘as an individual against the state, you can only lose’, Ori and Fatima portrayed individual institutional encounters, and especially quartier parents’ speaking positions in such encounters, as overdetermined by institutional power. They advised to navigate these by abiding by institutional rules and norms. Police racism and school inequalities do need to be battled, they told parents, but this requires ‘collective action’. ‘That’s how an association like the center can help’, Ori pointed out, ‘you can share and work together, and create solidarity in the neighbourhood.’

This pedagogy of making institutional speech contexts legible thus distinguishes and alternates between individual and collective voice, ideal and realistic understandings of the nature of institutional public space, and normative and disruptive ways of speaking to institutional audiences. Oscillating between recognizing institutional injustice, and instilling institutional norms and loyalty, this pedagogical technique reformulates individual parents’ experiences into a (classed and racialized) collective one.

**Staging an alternative institutional speech context**

One of the steps in the UPP trajectory is that of creating a ‘following committee’, consisting of representatives of the agencies financing the UPP and local institutional actors. The aim of the committee is to create local partnerships for the citizenship actions that an UPP is to organize, as well as to allow UPP parents to become recognized interlocutors in the public, institutional arena of their neighborhood. These committee meetings and their preparation can be viewed as a
fourth paralinguistic technique: that of staging an alternative institutional public speech context, one in which deprived parents can speak, as a collective, on equal footing to institutions. This technique, however, also brings into focus the way in which the UPP, and other discussion groups, dovetail with a larger network of projects, officials, and professionals working to stimulate the participative voice of working-class neighborhood parents for their own reasons.

Nadine and Corinne were regularly solicited to have the UPP-parents participate in projects or consultative meetings. In a context of competition between associations for project funds (Bassel and Emejulu, 2017: 58–62), this provided Corinne with important opportunities to enhance the visibility of the community center. However, Nadine feared that too much of such soliciting would overburden the UPP-participants, several of whom were also parent representative in their school or were involved in local participatory budget projects. This tension between the wish to generate a collective voice with impact and fears of co-optation and overburdening loomed large.

To create a comité de suivi, Nadine and Corinne had networked to invite the agencies financing the UPP project, as well as several professionals and officials, to come and meet the UPP parents. A week beforehand, Nadine and Corinne met with the UPP-participants to prepare. Their aim was to destabilize and recalibrate the normal hierarchical speaking relations between deprived parents and institutional representatives. They sought to do so by attending to a myriad of pragmatic, contextual details.

Corinne provided the parents with detailed information on the invited professionals, giving them an ‘informational’ upper hand. She emphasized the value of parents’ own insights for these professionals, several of whom she knew to be struggling with organizing groups for parents themselves. Nadine and Corinne asked, rehearsed, and took notes of what parents wanted to say. Corinne also attended to the spatial aspects of speaking positions. She planned to have parents and professionals sit in a circle, so that parents wouldn’t have to stand in front of an audience of professionals in a ‘school-like setting’. She and Nadine promised to make sure that parents would be seated close to each other, enabling them to find support in one another’s physical proximity. Corinne and Nadine also proposed creating new, more horizontal speaking relations by starting the comité de suivi with one of the games that parents often used in the UPP-meetings. This would ‘loosen up’ [décoincer] professionals, Nadine explained, and create a more informal atmosphere. As parents suggested one game after the other, the very image of having bureaucrats and institutional actors do these games got everyone to burst into laughter.

On the day itself, Nadine, Corinne, and the mothers were all sharply dressed and slightly nervous. After the introductory game, which the invitees underwent with somewhat uncomfortable smiles, everyone sat down around the tables. Taking turns, the parents explained the project, describing how they got involved, and what themes had emerged – most prominently, the inequality of the school system and violence in schools. Khadija, holding the notes Nadine had written out
for her, as she herself has difficulty writing, described what participating meant to her: ‘Before, I wouldn’t have been able to speak up like this, in a group. But now, I can.’ After the meeting, the guests congratulated the mothers and praised the ‘pluri-culturality’ of the group. Nadine and the parents radiated pride.

As Corinne had predicted, the questions posed revolved mostly around how and why parents had come to participate. It revealed the invited professionals’ interest, whether as funders or as (future) organizers of discussion groups, to better understand the conditions of the UPP’s success. The invited social workers talked at length about their own projects with parents. The officials mentioned the many consultative meetings through which they tried to gain a better insight in parents’ needs and perspectives, as well as projects with local groups of parents. ‘Let’s keep in contact’, urged one of them, ‘because we need neighbourhood residents’.

In this paralinguistic technique, professionals sought to stage a pedagogical instance of an alternative institutional speech context. Instead of crafting an ‘intimate public’ or civic semi-public space, this technique seeks to momentarily reshape the Republican public domain of state–citizen relations itself into a new, more informal, horizontal, and inclusive form. By directing both quartier mothers and institutional actors to practice and experience such a reconfigured institutional speech context, professionals hoped to plant seeds with a lasting transformative effect. The participation of institutional actors during the meeting, however, shows that they, too, were in search of new transistors that could circuit previously invisible and presumably silent individual subjects into a collective of citizens able to contribute to the public institutional domain. The participative public voice of quartier parents was a sought after and valuable resource. The discussion group’s promise of conduit responded to a wider governance need and desire. As the official so poignantly put it: everyone needs parents and neighborhood residents willing and capable to speak in public.

Conclusion

Let me end by returning to Kunreuther’s notion that a formation of voice consists of a ‘division of speech and action’ (2009: 546). The parenting discussion group brings to the fore a particular classed, gendered, and racialized division of labor. I have argued that to understand this division solely in terms of an individualizing responsibilization of cité mothers, however, is to miss the salience of discussion groups’ promise of conduit. I have used the metaphor of the social transistor to capture this promise. Like a transistor, the discussion group is meant to generate two interconnected circuits of parents’ speech and its effects. One inwards, working to heal the inner selves of cité parents stifled by institutions and reconstituting them into agentive citizens. The other outwards, connecting these reconstituted citizen-parents into new collectives oriented to act in the public, institutional domain so as to engender a new, more inclusive kind of Republican public.

The paralinguistic techniques through which professionals aimed to give discussion groups this double effect alternated between different understandings of the
conditions of a viable ‘public’ sphere, and different intended audiences for parents’ speech. They combined intimate and civic publics, alternated between normative, critical, and alternative pedagogies of institutional speech contexts, summoned individual and collective voice, and sought to connect private experiences to public causes. It was precisely this ambiguous combining and connecting that gave discussion groups a transistor potential.

The salience of the discussion group as social transistor, both theoretically and governmentally, is that it brings to the fore a broader anxiety in postcolonial France. As the Republic is imagined to be disintegrating because of social fissures and the failing reach of Republican institutions, especially in the ethnically diverse quartiers, what is needed are new conduiting nodes, capable not just of bringing subjects into the public fold but also remaking that fold itself. The attraction of discussion groups, even if they reach only a handful of parents, is that they hold the promise of being such nodes. They also highlight that the division of labor in such nodes depends on marginalized parents to carry the brunt of healing the Republican public, hauling them to invest these nodes with their voice.

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Notes
1. All names are pseudonyms.
2. Parole in French refers both to that which is spoken and to speech. In social policy and political discourse, it is also used as the English ‘voice’. Groupes de parole resemble support or conscious raising groups and have been an important tool in French feminism (Charpenel, 2016).
3. The terminology of ‘parents éloignés de l’école’ surfaces in a range of policy texts by the ministry of education, the Paris municipality, and urban policy projects. See for an example: https://www.ac-paris.fr/portail/jcms/jc_937065/renforcer-la-coopération-entre-les-parents-et-l-école-dans-les-territoires.

4. Surprisingly, the literature on French parenting support policy rarely mentions this genealogy.

5. See for a visual illustration of the concentration of parenting support projects in working-class neighborhoods: CAF de Paris, June 2016, Schema Parisien des Services aux Familles, p. 17, 33, 35.

6. This was financed by a health-care agency under the heading of the prevention of risk behavior.

7. Family workers and therapists usually have distinct professional approaches and status. Because Fatima and Ori both had migrant backgrounds, identified strongly with the principles of éducation populaire, and had a-typical career paths depending less on formal training and more on job experiences, this was less the case here. Both were fluent in the habitus and language of the cité. They did keep to a division of roles: Fatima helped parents formulate questions and issues, and Ori told instructive anecdotes and stimulated parents to reflect on their role.

References


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Anick Vollebergh is an assistant professor at the Radboud University. Within the ERC project ‘Reproducing Europe’, she has explored the politics of parenting support in ethnically diverse urban areas in Paris. She has previously published on the ethics and discontents of ideals of neighborliness and living together.