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Performing policy conflict: A dramaturgical analysis of public participation in contentious urban planning projects

Lisa De Roeck[1] · **Wouter Van Dooren**[1]

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Abstract
Whether endemic or overt, conflict is an intrinsic part of policymaking. Public participation promises to give a place to those conflicts in a more inclusive and productive way. Previous research has primarily focused on the substance and discourse of conflict, studying what conflicts are about and how actors give meaning to conflicts. Less attention has been given to how conflicts are enacted and performed when citizens and the state meet. Using a dramaturgical approach, this paper explores how the performances, staging practices, and scenography of public participation influence policy conflicts. The research concentrates on two contentious urban projects in the Belgian city of Genk, employing ethnographic observation of participatory moments to expose the performative elements of participation. The analysis uncovers the artifacts and communicative methods that narrow the conflict scope, determine the micro-politics of the participatory meetings, and influence whose voices are heard. Using a dramaturgical analysis framework sheds light on some underexplored, micro-level dynamics of participatory efforts that may limit the scope of policy conflict. Understanding these micro-mechanisms is essential for a more inclusive and equitable urban transformation policy.

Keywords Policy conflict · Dramaturgical analysis · Participatory policymaking, contentious policymaking

Introduction

Conflict has become a central concern in policy studies. Recent research has focused, amongst others, on the institutional context that establishes interest configurations around conflicts (Weible & Heikkila, 2017), the language that informs processes of sensemaking of conflict (Wolf & Van Dooren, 2017) and the emotions that generate critical engagement with conflict (Verhoeven & Metze, 2022). Less attention, however, is given to how conflict

✉ Lisa De Roeck
Lisa.deroeck@uantwerpen.be

[1] Research Group Politics and Public Governance, University of Antwerp, Antwerp, Belgium

actors involved in contentious policy processes enact and perform conflict. Conflict can be conceived as a performance within a sequence of staged events (Hajer, 2005). Similar to a theatrical performance, real-world actors on real-world stages play roles that reflect the contestation and disputes on various policies. 'Performing conflict' thus directs our attention to how actors such as policymakers, residents, and urban planners enact conflict in a specific context and setting.

Specific performative and discursive elements make up the performance of conflict: a loud or hushed voice when speaking, the specific seating arrangement in the room of a participatory hearing, and the use of special lighting or props for making a certain point. These performative elements contribute to how conflict is and can be enacted. How a conflict is performed not only tells us how the participants experience it. It also influences who is in and excluded from the conflict. Similar to an opera or a modern art exhibition, the threshold for participation in policy conflict can be high. The performing of conflict in a public participation process can create a sense of belonging or alienation. Eventually, the performing of a conflict will also affect the possible outcomes of the conflict and the decisions that are made. Therefore, with this article, we aim to answer the following research question: How is conflict performed during participatory moments?

We use concepts and methods from theatre and dramaturgical studies to study how conflict is performed. Dramaturgical analysis in social sciences sees everyday interactions, such as those during participatory moments, as theatrical performances (Hendriks et al., 2016). It makes use of theatre-associated concepts to describe and analyze social reality. This dramaturgical approach offers a new way of understanding and analyzing how sense-making regarding conflicts in certain social situations is done. Aspects of social life in political contexts are often taken for granted, such as how actors speak, how arguments are acted out, who is perceived as the audience (and who is not), and how the physical environment influences the interactions (Escobar, 2015; Ercan & Hendriks, 2022). Thus, it allows us to focus more on agency, often overlooked when studying democratic processes and structure (Escobar, 2019). If conflict is valuable for democratic policymaking, how it is performed and enacted is also important. Conflict performance is a visual and tangible element of conflict. Through its performance, politics can be seen (Gluhovic et al., 2021).

We selected two cases of climate change policies within the same city. Cities develop urban climate policy in different spaces, or, to make the dramaturgical analogy, on different stages. These stages include more traditional spaces, such as council meetings and local news media, and newer spaces, such as social media and participatory moments. Some conflicts on these stages are visible and manifest, while others are hidden and latent. Climate change-related policies provide an interesting context for studying how conflict is performed. Both our cases bear similarities and differences regarding the level of participation, the intensity of the conflict, and the substance of the policy proposal.

We collected data through ethnographic observations to study how and by whom conflict is enacted and performed in practice. We developed a framework for applying a dramaturgical analysis based on the works of Goffman (2022), Hajer (2005), and Escobar (2015). We argue that studying how conflict is performed gives a more nuanced understanding of this complex and dynamic phenomenon and complements other lineages of scholarship studying policy conflicts. Furthermore, it gives more insight into which voices are heard within policymaking and which are not (Wolf, 2021).

Theoretical background: policy conflict and its performance during moments of participatory governance

An increasing number of public policy researchers are focusing on policy conflict, not simply as a background concept or a means to explain other phenomena but as a significant subject of study in its own right (Verhoeven & Metze, 2022; Weible & Heikkila, 2017). Policy conflict can be defined as the expression of incompatible interests (Wolf & Van Dooren, 2018), as the disagreement over policy decisions and the behavior to influence the outcome of that decision (Weible & Heikkila, 2017) or, within transition studies, as a struggle between incumbent regimes versus emerging niches (Yuana et al., 2020). The social mechanisms that drive conflict escalation are, among others, framing, emotional stories, labeling, and depoliticization (Wolf, 2021; Wolf & Van Dooren, 2018; Verhoeven & Metze, 2022).

Authors like Wolf and Van Dooren (2018) and Verloo and Davis (2021) argue that policy conflict can have positive outcomes, in line with an agonistic view on democracy (Mouffe, 2005). They suggest that consensus-oriented approaches to democratic practices do not fully recognize the value of productive conflict. Recognizing the potential positive functions of conflict raises theoretical and empirical questions about the role of policy conflict in policymaking. They argue that there should be space for conflict in policymaking and that the extent of this space is influenced by institutional factors (Weible & Heikkila, 2017) and the discourse of conflict (Wolf, 2021), which can, for instance, be more or less oppressive towards those who disagree. Room for conflict can also be influenced by how conflict is performed.

Participation in policymaking (in different forms and levels) may lead to empowerment, learning, and legitimation (Cuppen, 2018; Verloo, 2023; Fischer, 2012), provided that participatory processes allow for inclusive and productive conflict (Dean, 2018). How participation is organized also influences how conflict within the participation process is performed and, thus, how conflict is 'allowed.' For example, in a town hall meeting where a trusted moderator encourages and facilitates open dialogue, conflicts might be more likely to be constructive. In participation events that are rigidly structured with hierarchical speaking orders, conflicts may be suppressed or marginalized.

Dramaturgical theory can inform us on how conflict is performed in public participation. Goffman (2022) introduced the notion of dramaturgy within sociology, after which theatre-associated concepts found their way into the broader social sciences to describe, analyze, and explain social reality (Ercan & Hendriks, 2022). Goffman's dramaturgy helps to understand how different actors are bound by their roles in certain situations and contexts, the expectations of those roles, and the counter-reactions that emerge from this role-playing. Hajer (2005) applied dramaturgical theory on participation. Participatory processes, like policy processes in general, can thus be seen as a sequence of staged performances with different sets of actors and loosely understood rules and scripts to arrive at legitimate decisions (Hajer, 2005; Escobar, 2015).

A dramaturgical analysis allows zooming in on the micro-dynamics often taken for granted within policy processes. These micro-dynamics shape and order the social reality. According to Hajer (2005), dramaturgical analysis can open a dimension of studying political processes that otherwise would be impossible to grasp. Similar to analyzing theatre performances through a dramaturgical lens, we can apply this approach to political performances. It helps us better understand how specific elements shape the atmosphere and

narratives and offer more or less space for conflict. Goffman's dramaturgy can be an inspiration for doing this, without losing sight of the broader macro-structures that shape these everyday settings and, as Goffman puts it, "without being too dogmatic in this approach, and by acknowledging that this analogy in part is also a rhetoric and a maneuver" (Goffman, 2022, p. 232).

The added value of using a dramaturgical approach to study policy processes lies in its ability to examine the micro-dynamics of policy-making, particularly when it involves deliberation with citizens (Ercan & Hendriks, 2022). Dramaturgy provides ways to scrutinize the use and interplay of space, speech and material elements. It also examines how space, speech and material elements are enacted and received, and, therefore what they 'do', in terms of, for example, (de)legitimizing the presence or the knowledge of people during participatory moments. Participation can be perceived or experienced as exclusionary and even alienating (Young, 2002). Dramaturgy helps us understand why. It gives tools to unpack the mechanisms structuring the moment of participation. The way material elements, for example, shape interaction and power dynamics, are difficult to fully understand when not incorporating the different performative elements in an analysis.

A dramaturgical analysis also allows studying how these performative acts influence which emotions are allowed and who can express them. Some of the performative elements can be used in favor of (the expression of) certain emotions while trying to minimize others. When people are welcomed in by the city officials in a room with a panel of experts and a PowerPoint in front, the setting suggests that deliberation should be technical, rational and not emotional. Such performative elements can influence the flow and the outcomes of participation but are difficult to grasp with, for instance, institutional or discourse analysis. Dramaturgy can broaden our analytical repertoire. Scholars interested in researching deliberative democratic practices also acknowledge the promising capabilities of dramaturgy (see, for example, Ercan & Hendriks, 2022).

This dramaturgical approach is already used in different social sciences disciplines regarding conflict. Dramaturgical analysis has, for example, been employed to study conflicts in transformative processes, showing, among other things, "… the material perspective on how power plays out in conflicts in the context of transitions." (Yuana et al., 2020, p. 168). Hendriks et al. (2016) used a dramaturgical analysis to study environmental controversies on social media. They showed that performances on Facebook leave limited space or tolerance for counter-scripts and thus do not serve as a bridge for opposing viewpoints on divisive issues.

Understanding the performance of conflict during participatory moments, as well as which performative elements are in play when it comes to allowing more or less conflict, is where our study seeks to contribute. Seeing participation and conflict as performative elements in staged event sequences raises interesting questions. Who has the power to control the staging of conflict? Who scripts the performances that take place within these processes? And how exactly is conflict performed? Theatre-associated concepts help to make sense of the micro-dynamics at play when performing conflict (Kowzan, 1975).

Some essential concepts used in our analysis include scenography, staging practices and performances. Firstly, scenography is about the dècor, how the material world and spaces where performances take place are created and shaped, and how this affects performer interaction (Ercan & Hendriks, 2022). Scenography includes the physical background but also the objects, props, and attributes that are present. These can all be seen as embodiments of

shared human evaluations and have important symbolic meanings (Verloo, 2023), influencing which behavior is appropriate and shown by the actors (and which is not) and which role the performers play. Secondly, staging practices shape the interaction between the different actors by directing what happens and using signals, symbols, and rituals. According to Ercan and Hendriks (2022), staging activities raise specific questions, such as who oversees the staging (and thus direction) of the interaction, which cues are used, and who is perceived as the audience.

Thirdly, performances are about putting action and interactions on the scene and thus involve the production, reproduction, and challenging of social realities (Ercan & Hendriks, 2022). Performances can be seen as public interactions that refer to a specific script, which shapes different elements of meaning in the dramaturgical process (Hajer, 2009). According to Goffman's dramaturgy (2022), performers (who, according to him, function in teams) try to define the situation and how others perceive them with their performance. A dramaturgical analysis needs to establish who the performers are, their objectives, and their techniques to define the situation or maintain the performance (Escobar, 2015). Performances also encompass speech acts and their emotional expressions. Therefore, not only is the content of what actors say is relevant but so is the tone of voice and to whom it is being said. In this regard, it is also interesting to include the notion of performativity, as understood by Butler (1988), which is how social agents use language, signs, and gestures to construct and 'perform' reality. This also goes for political action and democratic practices, as democracy is, as also stated by Ercan et al. (2023), drawing on Butler (2015, p.20), "constituted through a complex interplay of verbal and non-verbal performances, through images, acoustics and all the various technologies engaged in those productions." Focusing on performances within our analysis is thus one way of exploring the role of conflict within participation.

Participatory moments where the city government consults citizens can be seen as a theatre with performers and audiences, with actors who play a role while standing for vision. Even though we see the rise of participation in nearly all policy areas, knowledge about who scripts and directs these moments and how remains scarce (Escobar, 2015), even though the design of these moments also influences how policies are shaped and come into practice. How conflict is included within those scripts and how conflict is performed within these moments is also understudied.

The rationale for using dramaturgy is based on three key elements. First, it allows us to uncover the scenography of these moments, revealing how they are designed and shaped to follow a specific course. Second, it highlights the performative aspects and acts of enactment during these moments, illustrating how the allowance of conflict also entails a certain performance. Third, it provides tools for micro-analysis, enabling us to examine the interactions between citizens and state actors with a focus on language, emotions and tactics.

While these elements can be studied through other methods, such as discourse analysis, dramaturgy offers a framework that captures all three. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. A dramaturgical analysis allows us to identify the interpay between language, emotions and tactics. We believe this approach does not only contribute to the literature on policy conflict but also to policy deliberation and the way participatory governance is designed.

Seeing conflict as (part of a) performance and participation as potentially scripted or staged does not mean that the stakeholders involved have already predefined the outcomes of these processes. The analogy with improvisation theatre is arguably more accurate than formal theatre. When the process is predetermined, the focus on the role of conflict becomes

all the more relevant to understanding the dynamics of conflict better and identifying whether conflict is or is not valued by different actors within these governance processes (Escobar, 2015).

Methodology

Interpretive research and dramaturgy

Our research is rooted in the interpretive tradition of policy sciences and is complemented by a dramaturgical approach. Interpretive approaches to policy sciences center on understanding the meanings of policies and social phenomena, as well as how different audiences perceive these meanings (Yanow, 1996; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2011). In our study, we examine the presence of conflict within public participation, how conflict is expressed during the policymaking processes, and how individuals make sense of the various aspects of conflict. The dramaturgical approach serves as a method for exploring these meanings by focusing on the micro-practices observed in daily interactions among various participants. Having an interpretive approach to research means that we seek to understand social reality rather than predict it. This approach also involves recognizing that, as Wolf (2018, pp. 22–23) states, there is no ultimate observer-independent foundation on which to base our claims of truth.

Given the strong emphasis on uncovering subjective meanings, taking an interpretive approach requires us to be rigorous in ensuring the credibility of our claims as interpretive researchers (Wagenaar, 2011). We achieve this by being mindful of our positionality and how our perspectives influence how we collect, analyze, and interpret data. We maintain transparency in our data approach and cultivate reflexivity by critically examining our research actions, reflecting on them, and continuously questioning our ideas, while engaging with others. Keeping a fieldwork journal for each observation allows transparency in our data (Spradley, 1980), as well as ample room to consider any ambiguities before, during and after observations. The same goes for using memos while coding, through which we kept track of our choices and strategies of analysis. This all contributes to establishing a certain level of confirmability of our research and procedures (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Finally, we recognize that the data we gather represents our interpretation of the interactions that occurred. After conducting an initial analysis, we therefore shared preliminary findings with informants from both cases, as a way of verifying our insights (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In each section that follows, we will explain further how we take into consideration our personal assumptions and interpretations.

Furthermore, we believe that the spaces where conflict takes place are not neutral. We pay attention to power dynamics and broader social patterns of (in)equality that influence the staging practices and performances of conflict. The way conflict is carried out is influenced by the same dynamics that shape everyday life, impacting the decisions made.

Accessing the field and data

Through prior contacts with certain key figures in the public administration, we obtained access to the research field. These key figures became our informants and played a vital

role in approaching the respective contexts and what sort of data we could collect. Their insights influenced our initial research actions. To balance this influence, we also spoke and interacted with other stakeholders (such as residents and representatives of socio-cultural organizations) on various occasions and in different settings.

We collected data through ethnographic observation of participatory moments of public projects. Our strategy to obtain observational data was two-fold. Firstly, it involved regular exploratory conversations with our informants, who notified us about planned participatory meetings. These informants were either responsible for organizing or commissioning these meetings to consultancies. We discussed the goal and set-up of these moments with our informants, which led to us having this information beforehand. Table 1 presents the observed moments, their goals (as indicated by our informants) and the (estimated) number of attendees.

Secondly, based on these conversations, we attended participatory meetings as participant observers. This role of participant observer is inherently dual as it involves both observing and participating (Verloo, 2015). In our case, the emphasis was on observing. We could be seen as any ordinary participant. However, we did not actively participate in the conversations.

Using observational data enables us to go beyond participant reconstruction while also zooming in on the disordered practices of everyday policymaking (Dorren, 2021) and the interactions taking place. Additionally, we also undertook other activities to get a better sense of the research context, such as participating in a clean-up activity with residents in a certain area or interacting with residents during certain specific activities such as Dutch classes.

Generating data

We observed eight participatory moments over nine months (see Table 1 for the overview). These meetings differed in goal, setting, (number of) participants, duration, and outcome. However, they all had in common that they were organized by the city administration or by a consultancy firm appointed by a government authority to organize participation on a specific topic.

For focused observations, we used the categories proposed by Spradley (1980), including space, actors, objects, time, goals, language, and emotions. During our observations, we wrote down field notes, using a phone or paper, with the help of keywords and short sentences. These field notes were transformed into in-depth accounts of the observed moment immediately or shortly after the observation. Rigorously doing this, with attention to (sometimes seemingly unimportant) details, while trying to abstain from making initial interpretations in the descriptions, is a way of ensuring the credibility of our account and thus painting an authentic portrait of our research context (Spradley, 1980; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Each observation eventually resulted in thick descriptions of the events that had unfolded (Geertz, 1973).

We also kept a fieldwork journal for every observation, in which we noted down elaborate reflections on our positions during these moments, thus how we felt while entering the context and during the observations, what we expected upfront, and how this differed from reality. We also noted if we encountered any (practical) difficulties regarding observing, as well as other elements that sparked our interest or questions we still had afterward. Before

Table 1 Overview of observed moments per case

	Description	Goal (as described by informants before, during or after the participatory moment)	Performers present	Number of actors present
Case 1				
1.	Recurring meeting citizen panel	Inform and update the panel on current plans and get input on processes and plans	Civil servants; Residents; Representatives of socio-cultural organizations	15
2.	Ad hoc meeting with a site visit	Inform and update residents and other interested parties regarding specific construction works while addressing concerns and questions	Civil servants; Residents; Representatives of socio-cultural organizations; Local politicians; Experts	Approximately 25
3.	Participatory meeting in a specific area	Inform and update residents and other interested parties regarding plans for specific areas and get input on current plans	Civil servants; Resisdents; Representatives of socio-cultural organizations; Local politicians; Experts	Approximately 50
4.	Recurring meeting citizen panel	Inform and update the panel on current plans and get input on processes and plans	Civil servants; Residents; Representatives of socio-cultural organizations	10
5.	Walk-in moment regarding plans for a specific area	Inform local residents about planned works in a specific area	Civil servants; Residents	10
Case 2				
1.	Ad hoc information moment on a specific area	Inform and update passers by, get input on current plans, and collect concerns	Members of the organizing team (Participation consultants, planners/engineers, civil servants) Residents; Politicians;	Not to be determined
2.	Ad hoc information moment on a specific area	Inform and update residents of specific areas, get input on current plans, and collect concerns	Members of the organizing team (Participation consultants, planners/engineers, civil servants); Residents; Politicians	Approximately 180
3	Ad hoc 'public moment'	Inform and update residents of specific areas, get input on current plans and collect concerns	Members of the organizing team (Participation consultants, planners/engineers, civil servants); Residents; Politicians	Approximately 50

undertaking any new observation, we made sure to reflect on the previous one, together with the use of these journal accounts.

Throughout the observations, we tried to maintain a *disengaged*, *engaged* position, which allowed us to preserve the position of a 'stranger in the margin' (Ybema & Kamsteeg, 2009). This is important because, following Ybema and Kamsteeg (2009, p. 107), we can describe and understand the field from the inside only if we approach it from the outside in. Follow-

ing Dorren (2021), we tried to postpone judgments while observing, thus staying admissible for patterns that seemed obvious or normal for other participants.

We spoke informally with 2 to 5 participants during or directly after these participatory events about what happened and how they experienced them, sometimes asking for more clarification on a specific issue. In most cases, we also had formal conversations not long afterward with our informants about what took place, how they experienced it, and whether this was in line with their expectations. These conversations helped us make more sense of these moments.

Analysing data

The dramaturgical analysis used an analytical framework developed from the theory and our insights into the research context. To apply this framework, we first started coding our field notes in NVivo (release 1.7.1 for Mac) to conduct our analysis, generating descriptive and more analytical codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Coding was done in an inductive as well as deductive manner. We used the dramaturgical categories mentioned in our framework (performers, roles and audiences, performances and interactions, scenography and staging practices) to study the data inductively, having these specific categories in mind while reading through the data. During coding, new subcodes were created, such as codes regarding the use of humor and the expressions of emotions, after which we went back to our coded material.

While coding, we used memos in NVivo, to keep track of any ambiguities within our data, questions we came across and preliminary reflections for data analysis. Based on our coding, we searched for patterns, re-occurrences, and contrasts within the data using our analytical framework and through answering the questions posed in this framework. Appendix 1 shows our analytical framework applied for the micro-analysis of our observations.

Finally, we use an abductive approach to approach our research problem (how conflict is performed) by going back and forth between what we want to examine and possible explanations found in data and literature (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2011), thus between theory, method, and data. The abductive approach also links macro-social processes to micro-discursive events such as texts and words (Montessori et al., 2019).

Case selection and description: The transformation of a local valley area and the development of a new public transport line in Genk

The research paper utilizes an embedded case-study design, examining two cases within the same urban setting, Genk in Belgium. Genk, with a population of 67,000, is home to a diverse community. According to Genk in Cijfers (2022), 57% of its residents are of non-Belgian origin. The city played a significant role in Belgium's industrialisation during the 20th century due to its mining and car manufacturing history, which continues to influence its physical landscape today.

Urban actors such as the municipality of Genk encounter many challenges today. Facing climate change-related issues constitutes one of the largest threats to an inclusive society in urban contexts. Effective urban climate change policies are necessary to address the enormous challenges ahead towards a more sustainable future (IPCC, 2021). Therefore, having a better understanding of the conflicts that emerge around these types of policies, which spark

big and small conflicts, and capturing how those conflicts are managed and disciplined, ultimately contributes to more just and sustainable transformations. Therefore we opted to select cases that dealt with climate change in a broad sense and urban transformation given the high societal importance of understanding conflicts around this.

The selected cases involve different levels of conflict over an extended period, which allows us to capture the diversity and expression of conflict among a large group of actors. It is interesting to analyze both cases because they involve the same urban actors. Still, there is considerable variation in the other actors involved and how the conflict intensifies and becomes visible within each case.

Our first case focuses on the redevelopment of the Stiemer Valley, a stream valley surrounded by urbanized neighborhoods. The valley is disconnected from the neighboring districts due to pollution and past interventions. Access points from these neighborhoods to the valley are absent, as are connections with more significant urban sites. Not much space is provided for recreation or encounters within the valley. The valley does not play a significant role in the lives of most Genk inhabitants (Tas et al., 2021). The straight, concrete bedding of the creek discharges heavy rainfall too quickly, leading to frequent flooding of downstream areas. Additionally, heavy rainfall causes the overflow of the sewerage system, leading to creek pollution and unpleasant smells. The area has been undergoing redevelopment for quite some time. In 1995, the city decided to address the sewage overflows and to make it an enjoyable place for recreational activities. After many years of collaboration and various smaller projects, the city developed a master plan to redevelop the valley in 2015–2016. This plan wants to make the valley more resilient to climate change and create a welcoming green landscape with a diverse ecological system (Tas et al., 2021). The city regularly organizes participatory events to involve citizens in implementing the plan.

The second case is the development of a new public transport line in the province of Limburg, which passes through Genk. This new line, previously referred to as the Spartacusline 2, is intended to be 39 km long and aims to improve the connection between the cities of Hasselt, Genk, and Maasmechelen. The project seeks to provide a high-quality alternative to car usage. Initial plans were drafted in 2004. At the time, the plan was to build an electric high-speed tram. In later stages, it has been decided that an electric trambus, resembling a bus from the outside but with the features of a tram on the inside, will be build instead. The trambus has to operate in dedicated lanes as much as possible to ensure its reliability. Building these dedicated lanes will require significant spatial interventions in the city of Genk. In 2024, twenty years after the launch of the original plan, the trambus should be operating on a part of its route.

The redevelopment of the Stiemer Valley and the trambus project share many similarities as they both involve lengthy policy processes that require significant interventions in the urban space. They both have taken various participatory initiatives to interact with citizens and stakeholders. In both cases, policymakers must take into account local, regional, and international needs and concerns, as well as private and public interests.

There are also differences between the cases. The transformation of the Stiemer Valley is a project carried out by the city of Genk in collaboration with various partners, while the trambus line is being developed by the Flemish government, which has authorized a public organization (De Werkvennootschap) to execute and implement the plans, in cooperation with the involved cities and other partners. Besides the underlying governance structure, the level and type of participation also differ between cases. The city administration sets up

the different kinds of participatory moments and trajectories in the Stiemer valley, while the public transport case so far has fewer participatory moments, and a private participation consultancy firm does the design and execution in collaboration with the public organization.

Results: the enactment and regulation of conflict through its performance

Several performative elements affect the regulation and enactment of conflict. We focus on three main aspects: scenography, staging practices and the performances themselves.

Scenography: setting the stage for conflict with the use of space and props

Space, props, and dècor create a particular atmosphere and facilitate performances. Most participatory moments we observed took place inside, at locations with other functions, such as a local primary school or a fishing club. In most cases, participants had to register upfront or were in contact with a facilitator beforehand, and sometimes, they also had to sign in on arrival. In several cases, participants appeared to know each other or recognize others when they arrived at the meetings, which often seemed to create a friendly atmosphere.

Various props, such as furniture and PowerPoint presentations, are used to structure and guide the interaction. These props are mainly introduced by the interaction facilitators (thus, the actors organizing the moments or those presenting and facilitating what is happening during the moments). Sometimes, local civil servants were the facilitators, while in other cases, certain experts (such as architects and planners) or politicians (partly) took on the role of facilitators.

Props are used passively, such as posters of the project or information panels stressing the importance of the project. Passive props seem to set a general atmosphere in favor of the proposed project and plans. This is sometimes done subtly, for example on one occasion participants received stickers and pens to write down on the plans what they think about them. The stickers include pre-printed messages that participants can complete, such as '*Here is where I see chances…';* or *'This is what I like…*'. Some stickers have more negative-sounding messages such as '*This what I do not like…*'. However, participants receive less of the stickers with a more negative-sounding message and have more of the positive-sounding stickers at their disposal (fieldnote). This ensures a larger focus on the positive aspects of the proposed plans.

Props are also used more actively to influence the discussion and guide the interaction. At one point, there were tables in the room, each designated for a specific topic of discussion. Using a paper attached to the table, the organizers indicated which topic could be discussed at which table. When participants tried to ask a question unrelated to the topic of a given table, the facilitator immediately requested the participant not to ask the question and ask it later at the correct table. On several occasions, various maps of the areas involved were used to provide more insight and information to participants. Sometimes, 3D pictures, maquettes, and more detailed plans were also shown when explaining different sections of the plans. Large plans of the project area often served as meeting points for participants to interact with each other or with experts and civil servants, triggering debates and discussions, and in this way also emphasizing certain elements.

Participants also bring in props, such as residents who are members of a nature organization and wear sweaters with the organization's logos on various occasions. Logos serve

as visual representations of affiliation with the nature organization, which was on a certain occasion reinforced by a participant wearing such a sweater claiming he is present at the meeting to defend the interests of nature. Therefore, logos can influence the way participants engage in debates. Policymakers and other participants can quickly identify members of the nature organization and make assumptions about their viewpoints. As a result, some participants may hold back from engaging in dialogue based on their anticipated arguments, while others may become more vehemently involved. In this way, (passive) props preconfigure the conflict space.

Props shape interactions, emphasizing certain aspects while de-emphasizing others. On one occasion, one of the experts presented different pictures of how citizens can improve water infiltration in their gardens. More infiltration is an essential goal of the master plan of the Stiemer Valley. While elaborating, he mentions that there is also the option to connect rainwater to the street sewer system. However, the experts do not want people to do that, so he states that he did not include in the presentation as an option: '*Another option is connecting to the street sewer system in the front*, *but we really hope people will not do that*, *so I did not mention it as an option*' (fieldnote). The same message was repeated during the presentation multiple times: '*We do not want people to do this'* (fieldnote).

Occasionally we also see props-malfunctionings or unexpected issues. The plans on a PowerPoint presentation are sometimes not readable for participants, for instance, due to bad lighting in the room. On one occasion the facilitator explicitly mentioned this issue, but the presentation goes on nonetheless. Thus, even though this information is being shared to inform participants on which expertise backs up the proposal, no steps are being taken to properly present it. On another occasion, the facilitator hung up a timeline on the wall and asked participants to write on Post-its the moments of importance regarding the planning process and how they evaluate those moments. The answers would be discussed in the bigger group afterward. Unfortunately, the timeline started in 2018, while the project dates back to the 1990s. Many of the moments important to the participants took place before the timeline started, which the facilitator laughingly acknowledged. The Post-its were just simply hung before the start of the timeline. Thus, in this case, the use of props did not stand in the way of the discussion the participants wanted, with the facilitator using improvisation to give space to the input the participants wanted to give.

Directing conflict through staging cues and repetition

Staging practices determine the way performances are organized and directed. Staging has a significant impact on how conflicts play out. The role of the directors is crucial. They determine the course of the interaction by defining what should unfold during these moments and are able to make that clear during these moments. For example, during one moment, we witnessed a facilitator closing down the laptop that was used for a presentation, while questions were still being asked by participants, indicating the presentation was now over. They thus can redirect during performances, allowing less or more room for conflict and contestation. In our cases, primarily people from the city administration or facilitators from a private consultancy firm were directing the performances.

To influence the available space for discussion, staging cues can be used. We have identified different cues to signal the start, progress, or end of a participatory moment. For example, at the start of a participatory moment, facilitators often clarify the intention of the

meeting. They present the meeting agenda and clearly state what will be addressed (and implicitly what will not). Sometimes, they also mention that there will be limited or no time for specific topics, thereby immediately closing down the space and possibilities for discussing that particular point or opposing it.

Furthermore, during a performance, facilitators will often repeat the intention of the meeting or the next 'scene', actively and regularly remembering participants about the goal and the intention of the meetings. Sometimes, props are also used to facilitate this process, such as using a timer with an alarm to indicate when it is time to start discussing another topic. Another way of indicating it is time to move on to another part of the performance is to repeat the same question that was posed at the beginning by repeating and synthesizing the answers of participants and by asking if anybody wants to add something. This can open up space for contestation.

Often, participants tend to follow the instructions of the facilitators and others without actively trying to change the course of the interaction. However, there are cases where participants do attempt to alter the interaction, such as asking a question during a presentation when it was mentioned beforehand that questions were not allowed, or reacting to a presentation despite being told that there would be no time for reactions. Sometimes, the expert giving the presentation responds to the question, while in other cases, there is no response. Additionally, despite it being clearly stated that a particular topic will not be discussed, some participants still start discussing the topic. These staging cues, along with the use of props and space, maintain a certain level of control over the interaction (or what Goffman (2022) would call a dramaturgical discipline), ensuring sometimes limited space for conflict and making deviations from the script not always possible.

Performances

The actual performances on stage, including who is involved, what is being said, and how it is received, can be categorized into three types of performances. These are the performing concern scene, the performing disagreement scene, and the scene of appeasement.

The performing concern scene The performances often focus on expressing concerns. Participants frequently voice their concerns by asking questions or proposing alternative solutions during presentations by experts or facilitators. After expressing their concerns, different performers, such as experts and residents, react in various ways. Some performers agree with others using body language or adding additional concerns or information. Sometimes the expression of concern is not followed by a reaction, which seems to delegitimize the concern in the debate.

In other cases, concerns are reacted to by immediately presenting a counter-reaction. For example, we witnessed several experts stating that there is no other option than what they propose or that other options are not realistic or are unaffordable. Experts and facilitators also react to concerns by stating that what residents claim cannot be that bad or that people will have to learn to live with the situation as it is. These reactions prompt questions on whose expertise is being accepted or taken seriously and whose input and knowledge are not. For example, the following interaction took place between two residents and an expert who was involved with the plans for the Stiemer Valley:

> *'The resident said that if he would put a shovel in the ground in his garden, he would immediately encounter water. His wife agreed and said that when their dog went outside, his belly was always wet from the garden. The expert said that it is indeed a wet area, and it will always be like that. The expert added, smiling big: 'It is also part of why people love this area so much, because of the water, it is part of its charm and added: 'We will have to learn to live with the water.'*
> After this moment, somebody from the city administration stepped in and added that these residents live in a very wet area and face many problems. The interaction afterward continued: '*The resident added that they, for example, have a lot of frogs already in their garden* (because of the presence of water). *The expert laughingly added: 'But frogs, those are nice, right? You can handle a frog concert, right?' The couple did not smile and frowned a bit.'* (fieldnote).

These performances, which encompass speech acts as well as the outing of emotions through verbal and nonverbal communication, show that contestation, in the form of the expression of concerns, is not always allowed or is sometimes met by the disregarding of residents' stories or their feelings (Verloo, 2023). During moments of participatory governance, the interaction between residents and experts can be seen as political interaction, and how residents' concerns are being dismissed also matters politically.

On other occasions, we see that citizens also take on the role of facilitators instructing others not to dwell on specific issues, for example, when concerns are being voiced:'… *another man reacted to the first man, claiming that we should look ahead, not look behind and that we should try and stay positive, adding: "it's no use to dwell on that", and that it is no use of focusing on what happened in past.'* (fieldnote). This might reinforce an atmosphere where positive emotions are especially valued, something we also see when facilitators state at the start of a meeting: '*thank you for being positive and constructive today'* (fieldnote). This immediately sets the tone not to be negative about the project.

Local civil servants who are facilitating the process also express concerns about the plans and the overall process. They often align with others who provide criticism and also mention that the process has been long and challenging for them. This shifts the role of facilitators from being perceived as more neutral to being more engaged, which creates more room for contention. At the same time, the facilitators themselves never explicitly claim to have this more engaged role. It is important to note that the role of facilitators is thus never proclaimed as such, we as observers categorize their role in this way. This phenomenon of individuals stepping out of their expected roles is also observed with experts and facilitators admitting that they do not have all the answers, do not understand all elements presented, and share personal anecdotes with others.

The performing disagreement scene Experts, facilitators, and residents often explicitly dis- agree on the specific measures that must be taken or the plans in general. The performance of disagreement often builds on humor and cynicism: '*If we do that, all the basements of all the people in Genk will be flooded, I don't think that will make you very happy either*.' (fieldnote) *'Good luck finding people who want to give up their gardens for that, I tell you, nobody wants to do that*.' (fieldnote). Cynicism and humor are also used by residents to indicate distrust regarding the timing of the projects ('*We all are not going to live long enough to*

see this happen.' (fieldnote)), to hint at current issues or to express their general discontent: '*He laughingly said: 'They have money for the animals*, *but not for the people*' (fieldnote).

Body language and the making of sounds are also paramount during the performing of disagreement: *'The woman shook her head and responded that this is not possible.'* (fieldnote). Body language is used for expressing negative sentiments toward the plans of policymakers and experts, or to discredit others: *'A participant said that the persons who were responsible for this lied to them and he referred to them as 'these so-called experts'*, *shaking his head while saying this.'* (fieldnote). Participants also agree with each other making confirming noises when a certain sentiment is expressed. Body language is also used by experts, for example, by smiling (broadly) while not agreeing with others, or by sighing when a reaction is given by a participant.

In some cases, facilitators, experts and participants use modal verbs that indicate a certain necessity and to disagree or question what others are saying; for example, we see a facilitator responding to what a participant was saying by stating, '*…It cannot be the case'* (fieldnote) or an expert referring to a certain intervention with: *'That is just how it is done'* (fieldnote), or a participant responding to another participant voicing concerns: '*We must stay positive'*, shutting down the room for conflict immediately.

On different occasions, we see that, when participants voice disagreement, have certain doubts about something, or have another vision on a particular topic, facilitators and experts respond by saying that it is perfectly fine to have different opinions or that residents are allowed to disagree with certain things. For example:

> *'(A resident said): if you ask me*, *shut it all down. That is my opinion. Your plans look good*, *but I don't think they will work.* The facilitator responded: *'Yes*, *you may disagree*, *that is okay'*. The resident again said that she thinks it is a bad idea and the facilitator again said: *'Yes you may think that'* and added: *'But we have to do something*, *something will have to change'.* (fieldnote).

During another interaction at the same participatory moment, another facilitator mentioned, in response to a participant who disagreed, that it is good that there is dissent. The participant later mentioned that nobody ever asked her what she wanted, to which the facilitator responded: '*That is why we are here for today'*. The participant added: '*Yes*, *but everything already has been decided*.' (fieldnote).

Thus, while facilitators or others may explicitly acknowledge the existence of conflict and even welcome it, our observations prompt questions about the tangible effects of this openness to conflict. When individuals are encouraged to express dissenting opinions during these moments, but there is no avenue to incorporate these viewpoints into decisions (anymore), it raises doubts about whether there is genuine room for conflict or whether this is merely a performative gesture devoid of real-world consequences. We also notice how sometimes contention is identified as a burden, given the impact of it on the planning process: '*The worst case would be*, *that we will have to deal with a lot of objections*, *which would mean the construction works would start end of 2026*' (fieldnote).

The performing appeasement and reassurance scene In the observed scenes, there is a recurring pattern of appeasement and reassurance, where performers employ various dis-

cursive and performative techniques. For instance, they often emphasize the complexity of the plans and the area, as well as the technical nature of the tasks involved, as reasons for not delving deeper into specific aspects of the plan during presentations or talks. These complexities are also cited as reasons for potential delays in plan execution, deterring others from asking further questions or expressing criticism. Furthermore, facilitators and experts frequently reference 'serious calculations' (fieldnote), previous studies, and their own or others' expertise to reassure stakeholders when addressing questions, often stating that calculations have been thoroughly vetted by multiple experienced individuals ('*They know what they are doing'* (fieldnote)). These interventions might make it more difficult for others to go against this, as this would entail explicitly questioning the expertise that is being presented.

Other reoccurring reactions include references to collaboration with other actors to highlight the legitimacy of the plans at hand. At the same time, collaboration is also cited as a reason to explain delays or other difficulties: '*He said it is all going very slowly and that the reason for this is that they have to talk to many people all the time*, *that it is an important natural area*, *so many people want to have a say in it and everybody has a vision on it*, *and that is understandable.'* (fieldnote).

Appeasement is often sought by emphasizing shared responsibilities, as observed in interactions between experts and citizens. Experts stress that everyone must play their part and can contribute to solving specific issues or implementing plans, and it is not only on them to take action. Additionally, some experts mention that addressing certain issues is not solely their responsibility but requires collective effort. *'It is the responsibility of everybody. Everybody needs to help. What we are doing now is just a small step*, *and it is really important that we all help…'* (fieldnote). However, there are instances where residents and civil servants disagree with this sharing of responsibility, arguing that not all citizens are able to contribute due to past interventions or living situations, and suggesting that finding solutions is the responsibility of the experts involved.

Conclusion

Viewing moments of participatory governance as sequences of staged events where conflict is enacted offers a useful perspective to understand policy development. Policies often spark conflicts, some subtle and others more overt, but we have limited knowledge of the actual space these conflicts are given during participation moments. A dramaturgical analysis may help to illuminate the presence of these conflicts, their expression, and how they are managed during moments of participatory governance. A dramaturgical analysis combines performative elements with discursive aspects to understand social complexities in practice and the performances that structure them (Goffman, 2022).

Our analysis reveals how citizens, civil servants, and politicians are performers on the 'participation stages' that we studied. Communication style, discourse, the material components, and staging practices all influence the presence, enactment, and figurative space available for conflict. Recent work of Asenbaum (2023) aligns with this view. In "The Politics of Becoming," Asenbaum (2023) emphasizes the significance of space, which is not limited to physical dimensions but is a construct that both enables and constrains action

and agency. The design and physical aspects of democratic moments play a crucial role in participatory processes and the expression of conflict within them. Furthermore, Asenbaum suggests that "democratic space forms assemblages consisting of material objects, sentient bodies, and performative expressions" (Asenbaum, 2023, p. 18). Spaces are utilized to facilitate democratic interactions and conflicts.

Our results suggest that participatory moments are often strictly led by the ones facilitating the meetings (within our cases, most of the time, that is done by civil servants and experts, sometimes with the help of politicians). We see that performers sometimes switch between various ambiguous roles and, in this way, give less or more space to contestation. Facilitators also use different props and materials (such as maps, tables, and presentations) and staging cues (repeating goals, indicating timing) to direct the interaction and sometimes ensure the discussion stays on topic. Props, which have in themselves symbolic value and play different roles within collective action (Gardner & Abrams, 2023), can also be used to give more or less space to conflict. Going deeper into specific topics is not always allowed, limiting the possible space for contestation. The interplay of all these elements brings about a certain performativity that also exhibits power, as mentioned by Butler (1988), which feeds into the interaction between performers. In general, even though these moments are directed, there are also various moments of improvisation and moments in which other actors take over from the ones directing, for example.

Within our cases, we established three types of performances while studying contentious interactions: the performance of concern, the performance of disagreement, and the performance of appeasement and reassurance. Within these performances, various speech acts and arguments are put forward by diverse performers, which sometimes limit the available space for contestation and conflict, such as referring to the complexity of the plans/area, shared responsibilities, and expertise. These expressions are reminiscent of the post-political thesis, as proposed by Swyngedouw (2009), and the way debate and agonism, for example, are replaced by a techno-managerial consensual discourse in the name of progress (Swyngedouw, 2009).

Some of these performances limit the space for conflict by silencing concerns, re-directing attention, and possibly keeping others away from difficult conversations. These findings are in line with the work of Verloo (2023) on participatory governance, where she reflects on the tactics and micro-politics of misrecognition within state-citizen interactions. We see in our results similar dynamics as described by Verloo (2023), such as disregarding citizens' stories, omitting their counter-narrative, and expressing displeasure for citizens' emotions. In her previous work, Verloo (2015) discusses the interactions between professionals and citizens as crucial moments in the conflict process. To truly understand this conflict process, we need to explore the micro-dynamics that occur during these interactions between citizens and the state, which dramaturgy allows us to do.

The study of performances reveals how different types of knowledge are being used and appreciated during moments of participatory governance. This taps into a broader discussion on the use of expertise and expert knowledge within policy processes as well as what is legitimate knowledge (Durnova, 2018). During our observations, it seems as if layman's knowledge is not being valued in the same way as expert knowledge. This produces a striking paradox: many of these moments want to unlock residents' knowledge, for example on certain spatial areas but on various occasions, their expertise is refuted or not taken seriously. At the same time, knowledge of others is presented and performed as the right knowl-

edge, through words and with the help of objects. With the use of performative techniques, expert knowledge thus becomes authoritative (Hilgartner, 2000).

The different ways in which knowledge is valued also highlight the potential tokenistic nature of moments of participatory governance and the possible pitfalls of this. Residents might become frustrated, with these policy instruments failing to reduce feelings of discontent and detachment, even though they are often designed to confront political disaffection (Fernández-Martínez et al., 2020). Using dramaturgy can help understand the exclusionary mechanisms at play during these moments, or what Young (2002) describes as internal exclusion and the sense of alienation that might come with them. Or as Champers (2007, p. 38) puts it: "*The problem here is not being left out but rather not being heard".*

The dramaturgical lens helps to identify scripts that capture the interplay between what is being performed (concerns, disagreement, appeasement and reassurance), together with the use of certain staging practices and props. These scripts might limit space to conflict during moments of participatory governance. On several occasions, these scripts are reacted upon with counter-scripts by participants or other actors. There is no fixed script (or set of scripts) to express or deal with conflict. Scripts are constructed upfront based on the various performative elements, as well as continuously adapted during the performances through improvisation and in interaction with counter-scripts (Escobar, 2015; Schenuit, 2023). Establishing the fact that these moments are a sort of performance and are (sometimes strictly) directed, with often limited space for contestation and conflict, does not mean the output of these moments is predetermined. Arguably, an agenda and facilitation directions are needed. However, our insights can serve as a reflection on how scripts can limit the spaces for conflict and contestation during these moments.

Our results show how dramaturgical elements on the 'stage of participation' influence the potential for conflict. Table 2 summarizes the findings. Some insights can be gained from this. Firstly, many of these performative elements serve to both expand and restrict the available space for conflict. In other words, they can be used for both purposes. This observation has interesting implications for how these moments are facilitated, as the same performative elements that currently inadvertently limit space for conflict can be used to do the opposite. We argue that this duality is also in line with the recent scholarship on policy conflict in general; conflicts are fluid, change faces and might escalate from a substantial dimension to a relational dimension. They are thus dynamic and change over time (Wolf & Van Dooren, 2021). In other words, conflicts are multi-faceted and the same goes for the performative elements that are used for allowing them.

A second important aspect is how improvisation is intertwined with these performative elements. This is evident, for example, when performers switch roles or use props. Improvisation is also noticeable when performers do not stick to the predetermined script facilitators or meeting organizers provided. These scripts, which form the outline and goals established by these facilitators, are rarely mentioned as such but can be noticed through the use of props and language, by which the meetings are structured.

Lastly, we need to examine certain performative elements that may seem to increase the space for conflict at a given moment without any effective consequences, such as the proclamation that conflict is allowed and necessary. Facilitators of the participatory events recognized the importance of conflict and the need to move away from consensus, as described by political theorists such as Mouffe (2005). On several occasions, actors explicitly state that conflicting opinions or dissent is allowed. These statements, however, evoke some

Table 2 Overview of performative elements and their influence on the space of conflict

	Discription of performative element	Example of how element ensures space for conflict becomes larger as seen during observations	Example of how element ensures space for conflict becomes smaller as seen during observations
Scenography			
Space	Physical location where performance is taking place (such as school buildings or townhall)	Participants can walk in freely, and are not asked to provide any information about themselves. Or participants have to register upfront, but are still allowed to enter if they have not done that	Participants cannot enter space freely, must register upfront and sign up while entering
Props	Material elements used (passively or actively) during performances (e.g. maquettes, posters, flyers, detailed plans, etc.)	Offering stickers and markers so participants can write down what should be changed to the plans	Offering more stickers with a positive sounding message to participants ('*Here is where I see chances…'; This is what I like…*') than stickers with a negative message (*This is what I do not like…*'); Use of posters and flyers that emphasize the necessity of the project/plans that are being discussed; papers that indicate that you can only talk about what is mentioned on the paper
Malfunctioning props and improvisation	Unexpected events that take place during performances (with or without props) and that require a reaction from performers	Performers adapt and deviate from script, to accommodate what others are saying or doing, for example letting participants elaborate on different topics than what was prepared	Performers do not deviate from script and use a prop, such as furniture to make sure they keep in control of the interaction
Staging practices			
Use of cues	Cues to signal the start, process, or end of a performance, mostly used by the ones directing the interactions	Facilitators who repeat what others have said and ask if there are still questions, to end a certain performance, is a staging cue that can make the space for conflict larger	Repetition of goals and intentions (which are predetermined by facilitators) of a meeting, throughout a performance, is a staging cue that safeguards a certain discipline by others and in this way closes the space for conflict. The same goes for limiting the time that can be spent on certain elements, which can be seen as a staging cue that makes the space for conflict smaller
Participant compliance and/or resistance	The way participants follow the outline of a performance and how that is managed by others	Sometimes participant resist outline of the moment and for example start asking questions when they are explicitly told not to do that	Compliance is sometimes ensured by structured use of props and cues and reminders of goals

Table 2 (continue d)

	Discription of performative element	Example of how element ensures space for conflict becomes larger as seen during observations	Example of how element ensures space for conflict becomes smaller as seen during observations
Switching of roles	Performers switch between their perceived roles	Facilitators (such as civil servants) who switch between different roles and show for example that they also do not agree with everything or know everything, is a possible way to open the available space for conflict	Residents who switch between their own role and the role of facilitators by reprimanding others to not dwell on certain issues or to stay positive is a way in which the space for conflict becomes smaller
Performances			
Concern	Performances regarding the voicing of concerns and the reactions to that	Performers who repeatedly voice their concerns on certain plans or planned interventions can make the room for conflict bigger	The rebuttal of concerns by other performer through arguments and with the use of modal verbs, is an action that makes the available room for conflict smaller
Disagreement	Different performances regarding the outing of disagreement	Performers who argue that dissent and conflict is allowed and/or needed, make the room for contention bigger. Using humor, laughter and cynical comments while disagreeing with others or delivering more difficult messages, can be a way of opening space for conflict, as this might make it easier to convey difficult messages and empowers actors to speak up	Use of cynical comments and/or humor, can at the same time limit the scope of discussion or dissent, as this can also be used as a way of reassuring others or to conceal conflict and diverging views, in a reaction to others
Appeasement	Performances revolving around appeasing others	Refering to shared responsibilities might make the space for conflict open up	Experts and facilitators who use various recurring arguments in interaction with citizens, such as referring to the complexity and technicality of the area and/or project, the necessity of the solutions, their own expertise or the expertise of others, previous studies, collaboration with others, and shared responsibilities, is an example of how the room for conflict can become smaller (as it becomes difficult for other performers to argue with this)

critical questions on the practical implications of this acknowledgment of the value of conflict. It should be more than a trivial and distracting statement. Conflict should not only be allowed or even welcomed, but seriously engaged with. Facilitators seem to have difficulties with putting conflict into practice, despite understanding the importance of dissent and contention.

This article aspires to make a contribution to current policy literature in three ways. Firstly, it introduces a dramaturgical framework for analyzing the micro-scale of policy con-

flict and how it is expressed and performed. These often-neglected performative elements, which also shape and facilitate conflict, can be better understood using our dramaturgical framework. This framework can be used to study various cases within different contexts of policymaking, from hearings in parliament to negotiations with interest groups and conversations with experts.

Secondly, our analysis highlights the many different performative and discursive elements at play during participatory moments, which shape and sometimes limit the available room for conflict and contestation. Together, these elements crystalize into specific dynamics that define the room for conflict. Our research findings add to insights into the dynamics of policy conflict. Conflict fluctuates, with periods of high-intensity alternating with low-intensity episodes (You et al., 2021; Wolf & Van Dooren, 2021).

Our results generate various questions that may be further explored within policy conflict scholarship. We found that the use of humor within policy processes by different actors is an important way of coping with conflict. As Forester (2004) established, the use of humor, particularly by mediators, can be an important tool to enable difficult conversations, to signal hope, and to deconstruct and reconstruct authority. Our analyses confirm that humor and cynicism are used during moments of disagreement by various performers, in response to others, or to indicate a certain distrust regarding policies. It might function as an empowering tool for certain actors, while also serving as camouflage for others. Although the use of humor is already scrutinized within conflict resolution and mediation studies, it offers an interesting focus point when studying policy conflict, for example when considering the relational dimensions of conflict as discussed in Wolf & Van Dooren's framework (2021) on policy conflict. Another interesting angle might be to scrutinize the use of humor along with the role of emotions within policy conflicts, following, among others, Verhoeven and Metze (2022). Additionally, analyzing how various actors use and perform humor during policy conflicts for the development of a collective identity, as discussed by 'T Hart (2007) in her work on social protest, could be valuable.

Our research shows that many public performances involve expressing and addressing concerns. More research could be done about the emotions involved. The study of emotions is well-established for analyzing public debates and policymaking (Yordy et al., 2024) (Durnová & Hejzlarová, 2023). Emotions such as fear or anger can give more insight into the presence of policy conflict (Fink et al., 2023). A dramaturgical approach can help to understand how emotions are handled during interactions between citizens and the government, and the effects of this interaction. By analyzing the dramaturgy of these interactions, we can focus on how emotions are performed, expressed, and responded to.

An important limitation of this paper is the sole focus on frontstage activities, thus the activities that are visible to others and where the actual performance takes place (Escobar, 2015). All these activities and performances are prepared in the backstage, for example during meetings between facilitators. To understand better why and how contestation is allowed during these participatory moments, it would be worthwhile to study the preparatory meetings where these moments are planned as well, thus ensuring we obtain more in-depth knowledge on how these moments are guided away from or in the directions towards conflict.

Our results have significant implications for practice. Firstly, our analysis highlights often-overlooked elements of participatory governance, such as the use of material and space, and how state-citizen interaction occurs. Additionally, our findings reveal the unin-

tended effects these elements can have on conflicts, the topics being discussed, how discussions occur, and who is taken seriously. The design of these interactions often encourages consensus rather than confrontation (Cuppen, 2012), and the performative elements of the participation efforts might reinforce that. Reflecting on these unintentional effects can be valuable for practitioners involved in designing and facilitating these interactions.

Secondly and related to that, dramaturgy can not only be used to study performative elements that limit the space for conflict but it can also be used to design deliberative and participatory moments that open up the space for conflict. The same performative elements can make the space for conflict larger as well as smaller. Thus, when trying to ensure there is room for dissent and conflictual visions during these moments, practitioners can consider performative elements and dramaturgy to realize this and to reflect upon how different roles, scenography, and staging practices can be used not to direct the interaction in a desired direction but to allow divergent views and opinions.

Appendix 1: Dramaturgical framework

Dramaturgical categories	Central analytical questions
Performers, roles and audiences	Which performers are present? Who plays which role? Do roles change during the interaction? Who is present where and when? Who is not present (and should be present)? Which performers (who are not present) are mentioned? Who is the audience? Does the audience change during the interaction?
Perfomances and interactions	How does the performance start? How does the performance end? How does the performance go about? What is the performance about? What is the goal of the performance? In what ways do performers interact with each other during the performance? How do performers convey others? Is body language used during the performance? Are there substantive tensions during the performance between actors? How are these visible? Are there dramaturgical tensions (e.g. performers that change roles, etc.) during the performance? Is the performance disrupted? In what ways? How is disruption of the performance handled? How is dramaturgical discipline ensured during the performance? What happens prior to the performance? What happens after the performance?
Scenography (physical and material components)	Where does the performance take place? For whom is the location accessible? For whom is it not? What objects are used during the performance? At what moments are they used? At what time does the performance take place? Where in the space are the performers located? Does that change throughout the performance and in what ways? What is the frontstage? What is the backstage? Is anything said about that?

Dramaturgical categories	Central analytical questions
Staging practices (signals, rituals and symbols)	Who directs the interactions during the performance? Who decides who gets to participate in the performance? How is the performance directed? Are there any staging cues give direction to the performance?

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Data availability The data generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to them containing sensitive content and are treated confidentially.

Declarations

Compliance with ethical standards The independent Ethics Committee for the Social Sciences and Humani- ties installed by the Executive Board of the University of Antwerp has given this study a positive advice.

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest to declare.

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