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Stories Communities Tell: How Deliberative Practitioners Can Work with Community Narratives

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Abstract

How do past experiences of public engagement shape the way communities view the role of public input today? In this article, we examine the case of a community in a mid-Atlantic college town whose civic history is shaped by stories of skepticism and hope regarding past experiences of public decision-making. We use methods of interpretive analysis to surface their stories—the tensions, the plot, the actors, and complicating events—to understand how communities make sense of their roles in civic life, the norms they share, and the values they wish their communities can practice. We argue that being attuned to the storied nature of civic culture provides an invaluable resource for practitioners of dialogue and deliberation to adapt the design of public engagement in a way that speaks to past experiences and brings forth the communities' shared aspirations.

Keywords

sense-making, civic culture, public problem solving, narrative

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Introduction

As deliberative practitioners, we have witnessed how a single utterance in a forum can derail an entire process of deliberation. This utterance could be a reference to past experiences or a collective memory that triggers feelings of distrust and disillusionment about public engagement. This is the challenge faced by dialogue and deliberation practitioners who enter communities with collective memories midstream. A community's civic history and the way people make sense of these events shape the expectations civic actors hold of one another as they engage in public problem-solving. Therefore, it is essential to recognize the power of these stories and understand their implications when designing public engagement processes.

In this article, we put forward the case of a community in a mid-Atlantic college town to demonstrate the importance of paying attention to stories communities tell about key episodes of public decision-making. We argue that communities' memories of poorly run public decision-making processes influence the way they understand the value of public input today. While we have observed skepticism, if not disenchantment, with the way public engagement was run in the past, we also observed how these stories reveal implicit norms and expectations about how a community should address complex public issues.

Our motivation for writing this article is simple. Our hope is that practitioners of deliberation and dialogue like ourselves—who are “thrown in” to communities we did not come from—can develop a sensibility about how communities' stories matter in the design and implementation of public problem-solving procedures. By studying the stories communities tell, we can uncover not only shared frustrations, but also implicit norms that communities value. Working with community narratives, we argue, is essential when making engagement procedures work within the contextual constraints and possibilities in a community.

This article is structured in four parts. We begin by making a case for studying stories and civic culture in relation to public problem-solving. We argue that stories give insight into how communities make sense of their everyday lives based on past experiences. Stories form civic culture which, in turn, serve as a foundation for any deliberative or dialogic process. The second part of the article then describes our empirical case. We provide a methodological overview of our project, followed by a brief description of two “episodes” in the community we studied that shaped perceptions of public problem-solving. The third section of this article then thematizes these perceptions, as well as provides an analysis of how stories reveal implicit aspirations shared by our respondents. The last part of the article draws lessons for practitioners and provides concrete suggestions for deliberative practice.

Storied Communities

Stories are an important building block of culture. Through stories, individuals come to grips with who they are and what their role in society should be. Stories that members of a common culture tell reveal expectations, highlight cultural values, and point out when those values are not being

upheld. The frequent telling and retelling of certain stories shape civic culture. As Ernest Bormann (1982, p. 50) puts it, stories build culture and sustain consciousness, and a “public consciousness is the sine qua non of culture.” Applied to civic life, stories about public problem-solving play a role in shaping a community’s identity. Stories communities tell about their past experiences create a coherent account of how they understand public issues, and how they approach the challenges of public life.

One reason why stories matter is because they provide an architecture for sensemaking. Karl Weick (1995) and Weick, Kathleen Sutcliffe, and David Obstfeld (2005) describe how actors make sense of events by transforming direct social interactions, dialogue, exchange of ideas, and reading of experiences into tangible meanings that inform opinions and behaviors. In this way, through “sensemaking,” people retrospectively interpret past events and interactions to craft the basis for future decisions (Weick, 1995; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Sensemaking therefore impacts how a community addresses public problems as meanings materialize that inform and constrain identity and action (Mills, 2003; Ryfe, 2005). Cultural narratives take shape over time as stories begin to emerge as “canonical, in the sense that plots conform to well-worn scripts, and characters are often typecast as villains, victims, and heroes” (Boswell, 2012, p. 4; see also Ryfe, 2005).

In the political realm, “narratives are not fixed entities” (Boswell, 2012, p. 4). Sensemaking is an ongoing process that is impacted by individual and collective narratives competing to define the community. For Anne-Marie Söderberg (2006, p. 399), “narratives may construct the same events differently and interpret the actions of the selected actors from different points of view.” But collective narratives do emerge, even if they are still contested in the ways the narrative is told. Later in this article, we will demonstrate how a diverse set of participants shared common stories about good and bad public problem-solving processes regardless of whether or not the events happened before they moved to the community. These stories have been passed down by other members and told and retold in public spaces. In order to move through a deliberative space, those who are involved must make sense of these existing narratives in order to understand how they are “supposed to” participate in problem identification and solution generation (Hamilton & Wills-Toker, 2006).

Despite the argument that dialogue and deliberation practitioners should consider the civic culture of their communities when engaging in process design, much of the existing literature focuses on how stories play a role in sensemaking *within* dialogue and deliberation processes (Black, 2013; Pateman, 2012; Ryfe, 2005; Scheufele, 2000). John Boswell (2016, p. 626) calls for a broader conceptualization of deliberation that acknowledges that deliberation happens in a system, including a “range of differentiated but interconnected spaces” spanning from everyday talk to more formal decision-making spaces. Thinking systemically enables us to see that narratives do work within deliberative spaces while contributing to sensemaking about the deliberative system. Carolyn Hendriks’s (2005) concept of participatory storylines supports this systemic view: she sees these narratives as shaping the role and “character” of the public in addressing public problems and promoting and legitimizing various formal and informal problem-solving processes.

Our focus is on understanding how stories and narratives shape meanings about civic culture itself prior to the emergence of a specific issue and the deliberative process designed to address it. How do we account for sensemaking that has already occurred regarding the way public problem-solving has (and should) unfold? What questions might these civic culture undercurrents surface?

Our intent in this article is to examine how individual sensemaking about past problem-solving processes contributes to an overall sense of civic culture with implicit norms and expectations about how a community should address complex public issues. We posit that key moments in a community's civic history and the ways that people make sense of these events shape the expectations civic actors hold for one another as they seek engagement in public processes. When these expectations become visible, abilities to design participatory processes improve and, as participatory processes improve, so does democracy (Michels & De Graaf, 2010).

Methodology

This research emerged in our own work as university-based dialogue and deliberation practitioners. Being based at a midsized regional public university, we have had opportunities to work with multiple communities to design and implement public-facing dialogue and deliberation events. In one of these communities, we observed that the same set of stories keep coming up when discussing project design. These stories are based on recollections of episodes significant to public engagement in public problem-solving.

This mid-Atlantic college town community shared many of the qualities of the large towns in which we collectively work: the presence of a college campus; economic stratification, racial and ethnic diversity; robust civic and religious organization participation; and, perhaps most importantly, a commitment to public decision-making. Public decision-making is often carried out through conventional means: public hearings, online commenting, public action, and informal talk. Yet, the recurring presence of specific episodes in the community's history, and how they seemed to shape dialogue and deliberation behaviors drew our attention.

This observation prompted us to conduct a research designed to examine how "stories of exclusion" shape the civic culture in this community. Our approach is to gather data that crystallizes citizens' perceptions and normative expectations about public problem-solving.

To surface how narratives shape civic culture in this community, we adopted an interpretive approach for this research. We collected data that highlighted participant perceptions and normative expectations. We gathered two sets of data.

1. We recruited participants for semi-structured interviews using a snowball sampling technique. We started interviewing people we had worked with in previous public engagement processes as we had both come to the community within the past four years and our knowledge of the community's history was very limited. We utilized our Institutional Review Board-approved protocol to be very explicit that this interview was for research purposes and would have no bearing on future working relationships. These individuals then recommended additional participants for the study who they considered were actively involved in shaping public processes. Our respondents were either conveners or participants in public problem-solving, and, in some cases, played both roles. To ensure that we had a range of community leaders and civic actors representing different sectors and affiliations, respondents include former elected officials, city staff members, nonprofit leaders, local public board or commission members, and community activists. It is important to emphasize that categories are fluid for respondents and that, at one point or another, they may have played various roles in the community. We interviewed 18

respondents¹ who were consistently mentioned by members of our snowball sample as playing key roles in public problem-solving processes.

Interviews lasted for 40 to 75 minutes each, resulting in 289 pages of transcripts. We asked respondents to describe two types of issues in public decision-making: those that the respondent felt were addressed appropriately, and those that were addressed poorly. We also asked them to consider the relationships that exist between citizens, community groups, and official decision-makers in their communities. Finally, we asked them to characterize the relationship between residents, community groups, and official public decision makers in the community, and encouraged them to reflect on the extent to which this relationship has changed over time. While we had a list of questions to ask, participants had enough leeway to steer the interview to themes they considered relevant.

In our interviews, we observed that there were two frequently cited examples of controversial public decisions. The first example is a decision made in 1999 to convert public land to a public golf course (hereafter Golf Course). The second is about the expansion of the size of the community jail (hereafter Community Jail). A summary of these stories is presented in Box 1.

2. To better understand the context and timeline of these examples, we decided to supplement our interviews with documentary data derived from public meeting records and journalistic accounts. City council meeting minutes formed the basis for much of the documentary data. These summary minutes provide a running description of the discussion that took place, including public comments, discussion among city council members, and votes. Although the record is filtered through the recorder's perspective and sometimes gives only the highlights of the discussions, the descriptions of public comments provided context to statements made during interviews. Local newspaper stories and archived televised city council meeting proceedings were the second primary source for documentary data, providing additional interview quotes and evidence for the impact of public problem-solving examples.

Having accumulated a wealth of data, the analysis had to be focused enough to spot emerging themes but flexible enough to develop new categories. We first coded a third of the interview transcripts independently, line by line, based on two "sensitizing concepts" common to narratives. Because narratives offer a way for people to share experiences in ways that highlight complications, bring values to the surface, and paint characterizations, we coded for tensions and influence.

Tensions. We started with the concept of "tensions," looking for what our respondents saw as the pushes and pulls that impact public problem-solving. We were attuned to how they articulated their past experiences and how these implied their desires for how things should be.

Influence. We focused our attention on how individuals narrated their roles and the roles of others, and who they perceived as being able to influence public problem-solving.

¹ This study titled, "Exploring a Community's Cultural Attitudes and Beliefs about Public Engagement in Civic Matters" was approved by our University's Institutional Review Board, IRB 16-0154.

After initial coding, we compared what we found to develop new categories that supported our interpretive themes. We ensured trustworthiness in our analytical process and findings by coding both independently and collaboratively (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Once dominant themes were finalized, we returned to the two public problem-solving examples referenced most prominently in the interviews—the Golf Course and the Community Jail—and examined where these stories linked into the broader themes. We did this to assess the extent to which sensemaking about past public problem-solving events shaped current dynamics between civic actors.

Box 1: Frequently Cited Episodes of Public Decision-making

Golf Course. The city council voted to begin construction on a municipal golf course in the face of significant opposition from the community. Tensions over the issue rose as the city moved forward with the project despite public input indicating that the majority of civic actors were opposed. A group soon formed to consolidate opposition. Over the following year, this group attempted to delay or stop the project through legal action or recall. Neither of these were successful, and the golf course construction proceeded. However, in the election that took place the following May, three political newcomers running on the platform of “open and responsive government” successfully replaced three long-standing city council members whose seats were up for reelection. Although these political neophytes pledged to halt the golf course construction, by the time they took office, significant funds had already been spent on the project and the city had already entered into a construction contract tied to approved construction loans.

Community Jail. Jail overcrowding challenged the community for a number of years with consistent over-capacity rates of 25% and an additional 100 beds leased at a nearby facility. The issue came to a head when the city council moved to formalize plans to apply for state funds for a new jail facility. A vocal segment of the community, with an organized and active peace and justice advocacy coalition behind it, came out in opposition. After several weeks of public hearings, the city council ultimately scrapped plans to build a new facility and instead agreed to continue purchasing beds in a nearby regional jail. However, public activism continued, as people perceived hesitancy from the city council to actively pursue alternatives to incarceration. While the agreement to lease bedspace at the nearby facility stood despite continued opposition, activists convened a community summit on reducing recidivism and worked with the city council to introduce or expand restorative justice programs within the community and, more specifically, within the city police department.

Findings

There are three resonant themes in our interpretive analysis, all of which point at the relationship between past experiences of public decision-making and aspirations for the future. We present our findings in three segments. First, we focus on the narrative tensions within the community when discussing the role of public input. In this section, we revisit some frustrations, anxieties, and reflections shared by our respondents as we asked them to look back on key episodes of public decision-making. Second, we transition from a discussion of the past to a discussion of prescriptions and aspirations for future public engagement, which, we argue, demonstrates the normative foundations members of the public desire. Finally, we present a brief analysis of how civic cultures are constructed and sustained through stories individuals tell about their community.

Narrative Tensions in Public Input

Perceptions about the influence of public input. The narrative emergent on the Golf Course suggests that public input collected by the city council does not influence key decisions. In this case, many members of the public felt that the city council repeatedly shut down or ignored their input. As documented in the minutes of the city council:

The primary reason that citizens have opposed the golf course has nothing to do with the golf course. The reason that some citizens opposed the golf course was the perceived inflexible manner in which it has been developed. Opposition was a clear response to elected officials, not to the golf course. Large numbers of citizens who voted for change want the golf course to be built. (Harrisonburg City Council, 2000, p. 3)

On a number of occasions, the city council dismissed requests for additional information to be released to the public or for the council to hear more public input. Further evidence of this was seen in the election of new city council members who ran on a platform of open and responsive city government during the golf course controversy (see Box 1).

The Community Jail narrative, on the other hand, demonstrates a shift in perception regarding the influence of public input. Several interviewees who mentioned the Community Jail discussed how organic, grassroots efforts helped citizens band together and shape proposals for projects or community initiatives that have been given some credence by officials. “They were willing to listen and give an opportunity for citizens to convince them,” says one community organizer who added that well-formulated proposals are taken seriously (Interviewee 1). When “citizens band together, spread the vision of something that could be, motivate others to join in the efforts, and identify not only what they want, but some sort of plan for how to bring it about” (Interviewee 11), city officials respond by recognizing that “citizens are ready to roll up their sleeves and help” (Interviewee 17).

The narrative on the Community Jail is that there is a space for citizens to drive solutions to public issues in ways that city officials can support. The key is for citizens to do more than just articulate their preferences, and instead do some of the work to show how a solution will work.

However, according to several respondents, city officials need to find better ways to invite the public into processes to generate a cooperative approach. One community advocate stated, “I don't think people actively participate... you have to tap people. And whether that's an organizer, or whether that's a politician, or whether that's a service provider, there has to be some sort of invitation to people to come into that process” (Interviewee 16). Once invited, the most successful processes, according to one interviewee

... are generally set up to be conducted in a way that people can communicate in a non-adversarial way. Civility is the expectation, and people tend to conduct themselves in that manner. It doesn't mean that somebody can't get something off their chest, but it's more in a problem-solving mode than just to dump on people and then leave. If you have an issue, let's work together on how that might be addressed... I think, for the most part, these processes I've described invite people to identify issues but then encourage them to be part of the solution. (Interviewee 14)

The interplay of these perspectives reveals a collective, emergent narrative that acknowledges a shift in the civic culture regarding the perceived importance of public input, a culture that has not forgotten its past, but sees evidence of collaborative approaches to public problem-solving leading to positive outcomes.

Our civic climate is at times constructive, at times anxious... There are certain issues and spaces where it's very adversarial and anxious, and other places where it's really not... it's more collaborative and constructive. The public talk, for instance in public forums, tends to be constructive and collaborative, but you still see people write letters to the editor that show that people are fearful, anxious, and angry. (Interviewee 14)

For this community, seeking public input means more than paying lip service to public opinions. It means creating spaces and empowering citizens to roll up their sleeves and play a key role in shaping solutions.

Timing of public input. When should public input be considered in the public decision-making process? The answer to this question depends on one's role. We found that nongovernmental actors tell the story of how government actors purposefully delay public input until after decisions have been made. Meanwhile, the narratives presented by government actors resist the term "delay" and instead indicates that public input is secured at an appropriate time within decision-making processes.

The predominant narrative *nongovernment actors* put forward is that the government asked for public input "late to the game." In the case of the Golf Course, one news story mentioned that city officials were considering borrowing money to build the golf course. The mayor expected that the council would take public input when the city was prepared to borrow the funds. "That's too late," claimed a citizen quoted in the same news story. "As far as what the public's perception would be... it's a done deal," adding that sinking thousands of dollars into studies and other planning activities does not allow the city to turn back. Providing input at this stage felt useless. "If the decision already has been made to build the golf course, the only reason for the forum is for city officials to justify building it," said one citizen. "It makes the... forum really a mockery of the democratic process." Sensemaking about opportunities where public input was solicited about the Golf Course as a public problem reveals a narrative of inauthenticity. Public input was sought only to validate a decision already made, or to be able to claim that citizen actors were given a venue to have a say.

How *government actors* make sense about public input presents a tension with nongovernment actors. One former government official interviewed recognized the timing challenge for public input this way:

Here's one of the biggest frustrations that is very difficult to overcome in city government. The staff identifies problems for the big stuff most frequently pretty early on... They are thinking of solutions. They have their consultant reports and their meetings and their staff and they get the Public Works input and the fire chief's input and stakeholder input. And they come up with solutions that they let council become aware of. (Interviewee 3)

Subsequently, when a project reaches the agenda of a public meeting, the staff already have a well-developed plan to address the issue. When the public is alerted to public problem-solving approaches after solutions are already preferred, it is difficult for public forums to offer an opportunity to move solutions into other directions. This results in what one interviewee called an “inertia to pivot.”

Expertise versus collaboration. The narratives above highlight a push and pull between efficient, expertly informed solutions and the role of the public as partners in problem-solving. One former elected official points to a “correlation between decision time and implementation—they are inversely correlated.” It may take some time to “share with the community as much information as possible, give an opportunity for input, weigh the pros and cons, come up with a tentative plan, go back to the community for their reaction, and then move forward.” A single person or small group can make a quicker decision,

but then implementing it may take much longer because you have to get others on board, maybe deal with legal challenges, communicate... If you have an open process that allows input, this period takes a long time but the implementation takes a short time because everybody felt involved and they are supportive. You go out and do it. The time is about the same. The question is where you want to invest it.

Nongovernmental actors felt that the time spent to frame problem-solving as a shared responsibility is worth the sense of efficacy it brings. One citizen observed that “what didn’t happen was very clear announcements from the city that *we* have a problem. *We* need to do something. *We* want to hear what people think *we* should do” (Interviewee 12, emphasis original). This respondent stated that there should be a clear announcement that a problem exists and a statement that it is “our” problem to solve rather than one for the experts in government.

The evolving narrative is one where elected officials, city staff, and members of the public are all engaged together in public processes that are aimed at finding positive and productive ways to address public problems, something that is deserving of the time required for this to occur.

Our community is really two communities, not separated, but rather nestled. Our old community still exists, and it's still a strong, cohesive community, a community in which lifelong relationships influence public processes. But another community—a community that is much more diverse with people who have come to the area rather than grown up here—has grown up around it.

There has been more change here over the past 10-15 years in terms of what's actually on the public agenda than there's been in the past 100, to be honest. For the most part, the majority has trusted that decisions are working. But the model is shifting from a model where “We are the government” to a model of “WE” are the government... We are still learning how to make the quality of decisions we have made in the past—the good ones—in a more participatory and inclusive way.

In making sense of how public processes have unfolded and how public input has been at times valued and at times eschewed, it is clear that there are tensions that need to be navigated. Listening to how civic actors make sense of these pushes and pulls inherent to public problem-solving offers

an emerging, if complex, understanding of civic culture and the normative expectations of civic actors.

Prescriptions and Aspirations

In our interviews, we observed that our respondents talked about the Golf Course and Community Jail episodes by telling stories about these events. The narrative structure of their responses provided insight into how, in their minds, they remember the plot, characters, and complicating events. Occasionally in their sharing about these events, participants even recounted dialogue attributed to specific characters that revealed what they perceived as the character's motivation.

These recollected stories and dialogue offer clues as to expectations of various civic actors and processes. It is in this evaluation that they more explicitly move from the "what is" to the "what should be" (Fisher, 1987). For Jerome Bruner (2003, p. 15), "story is enormously sensitive to whatever challenges our conception of the canonical" and can offer ways to imagine new possibilities. Interviewees offered contrasts about the roles civic actors do play and those they *should* play to make these public problem-solving processes align with civic cultural values, "recasting" some roles to allow more civic actors to play important roles. The negative ways our participants talk about the roles civic actors played in the Golf Course and the more hopeful ways they describe these roles for the Community Jail reveal that many civic actors in the community desire more inclusive, just processes that tap the public as co-collaborators in public problem-solving.

Table 1 below presents a contrast between the perceived behaviors of civic actors and the behaviors respondents considered to be desirable, revealing the aspirational character of the community's civic culture. This is a community whose stories are not just based on relitigating issues from the past, but on creating stories they want to tell in the future. These represent characterizations about both the self and others when considering public problem-solving processes.

Table 1

Perceived and Expected Behaviors and Responsibilities of Community Stakeholders in Addressing Public Problems

Stakeholder	Civic Behaviors and Responsibilities as Perceived by Others	Civic Behaviors and Responsibilities as Desired by Others
Elected officials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set agenda • Make decisions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Solicit, listen to, and address public input • Make best decisions for public good (even if unpopular) • Make efficient decisions • Balance long- and short-term interests
City staff and administration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Balance constraints between their public and private roles and values • Collect data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collect unbiased data • Solicit public input
Government commissions and committees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do legwork of research • Provide “cover” for council • Offer access to the public 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruit nonexpert members of the public to serve
Public	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Show passion for specific interests • Do not go to meetings • Do not get involved when it matters • Demonstrate lack of knowledge about how government works and the issues on the agenda 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attend meetings • Be persistent • Vote • Do research • Come with solutions • Serve on committees • Disagree and explain reasoning • Have an opinion • Understand constraints
Organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raise consciousness • Raise issues that need attention and mobilize people • Form coalitions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speak for those without access • Act as watchdog • Use privilege for others • Fill gaps in what the city is not doing
Industry and businesses (including universities)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shape agenda • Wield influence through economic power 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Should not wield undue influence

Sensemaking Roles and Responsibilities

The narratives that emerged from our interviews reveal two overarching themes in the ways civic actors make sense of the roles and responsibilities of themselves and others: (1) expectations of how “the public” should engage in decision-making processes and (2) determining who has standing to identify and name the “public good.”

How the public should engage in decision-making processes. Based on past experiences, members of the public have developed clear expectations about their behavior in moments of decision-making. Several nongovernmental actors who were interviewed noted that they have a responsibility to engage and to be informed. “I was not always aware of what was happening locally about justice and when I heard talk about building a new jail at a council meeting, it smacked me out of my cloud,” said one respondent (Interviewee 6). Another citizen said she feels that one of the “most important ways for people to be involved is to know the issue, and secondly to know the context in which decision-makers must make the decision. I think we’re really bad at both of these” (Interviewee 14).

Being “bad at both of these” is a product of knowledge context. One interviewee said an important barrier to citizen engagement is the discomfort of participating without knowing enough. “A lot of people think, yeah, we should do something different with our criminal justice system, but they are very uncomfortable saying what should be done. Because they know that they don’t have information to say what should be done” (Interviewee 12). Here lies a chicken-and-egg tension: Do citizens need to be informed first before participating, or can they become more informed through participating?

Different governmental actors noted that knowledge context and issue complexity have an impact on when and where public input occurs. One city official said:

I feel like with a complicated issue, it's hard, because on the one hand you want to just gather all the input you can up front, but it's difficult to gather input when the public doesn't have anything to critique or maybe they don't understand it yet. (Interviewee 7)

According to one interviewee, the ability of a citizen to understand this complexity and demonstrate both knowledge about the issue and about how governmental processes work increases their ability to influence change (Interviewee 18).

Part of the complexity of public problems relates to how civic actors talk about the short-term and long-term implications and who bears responsibility for keeping an eye on both. The Community Jail case illustrates this expectation. As one community organizer puts it,

It became very controversial when the jail was exceeding its capacity... There were a large number of people that expressed concern about what types of people were being incarcerated... Was there alternative sentencing, restorative justice? Many people weren't aware that it was on the radar earlier in terms of cost and other issues to justify looking for alternatives to incarceration, but I think that when the issue of the possibility of building a new jail came up, it really brought people out. (Interviewee 14)

For public engagement to be productive, the feeling is that the public needs to be aware of issues

before it becomes headline news. The sentiment shared by many government actors is that members of the public need to attend meetings or track what issues are being discussed in committees to be able to more effectively shape solutions.

Overall, this theme illustrates the desire for governmental and public actors to understand that the complexity of issues directly correlates with abilities of the public to engage in decision-making. This has an impact on the timing of public engagement and necessitates that the immediate and future impacts of solutions be fully considered. The current narrative describes the public as uninformed and, at times, late to the decision-making process. The aspiration is a well-informed public and an eager-to-listen government.

Determining standing to declare the “public good.” Our respondents put forward a nuanced take in defining who “the public” is and who has standing to provide legitimate public input. Participants argue that newcomers to the community and those with a long history of residence in the area have different legitimacies of their visions of the city. For one interviewee, this tension is between protectionism and progressiveness. Change-averse community members who “feel like the city can go back” to an idyllic past stand in opposition to those who “think [the city] was just founded in 1980” and lack a historical view of the community (Interviewee 2). Another interviewee agreed that there are those in the community who see themselves as “stewards of a distinct cultural identity in [the region]. People who are more recent arrivals don’t necessarily appreciate or understand this and have different motivations and worldviews” (Interviewee 13).

Being newer to the community influences the role members of the public feel they can play in shaping this vision. “When I first came here, I was strongly treated as a transplant,” says one interviewee. He says that after being here for 16 years, “I’ve earned my right to be a community leader. I’ve earned my right to be engaged” (Interviewee 4). He says that earning this right involved respecting the landmarks that are here, knowing the history of the people, and understanding what existed before he came to the area.

Being new is not the only identity marker linked to perceived limitations to participation. In this college town, the university student population has doubled over the past 20 years, with approximately one-third of the population consisting of students. This creates tensions about how much influence students should have in defining the community. In a news story about the Golf Course, two of the city council members at the time cast students as not being on equal footing with permanent year-round residents who pay taxes. They inferred that students would favor shortsighted issues instead of long-term planning.

Similar to the question of which stakeholders have standing to determine the public good is the question of which issues are selected as relevant to the public good. This narrative, at times, casts members of the public as passionate about “their” issues but not always focused on the things that will be most consequential to public life. The narrative casts governmental actors as needing to balance the interests of specific groups with what is best for the entire community. One city employee recognizes that residents “love the city, they want to see a better city. And better is their own definition.” But this employee would like to transform that passion and recognize that groups rallied over a narrow common interest: “produce energy, energy that public officials would like to harness” (Interviewee 17). Public officials perceive themselves as struggling with how to best channel this energy toward broader, community-level public problem-solving rather than toward

narrower interests.

These data reveal how actors have made sense of the multiple roles that both government officials and different segments of “the public” play, some with legitimacy and some without. The aspirational narrative is one about balance, where university students participate on issues of direct impact to them, but not to others, where old timers and newcomers meet up in dialogic spaces, where those with previously undue influence step back a little, and where government officials facilitate from a more neutral perspective.

Table 2

The Aspirational Narrative of What Should Be

Narrative Themes about How Public Processes Have Unfolded	Description of the Aspirational Narrative
<p>Public processes have</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • not worked because the decision did not match majority opinion • been constrained by bureaucracy • been largely ineffective due to “pivot inertia” or difficulty in moving away from the path of early decision-making 	<p>Public processes should</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • be proactive • be transparent • be complemented by traditional governance structures with better ways to engage with the public (i.e., council meetings) • offer authentic engagement • involve stages of listening, learning, anticipating trade-offs, followed by compromise • offer the chance to hear different perspectives and see the big picture • be grounded in rationality • disperse power • make better use of community expertise
<p>Governmental actors have</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • used little known processes to shape outcomes • used public processes as a “theater of public opinion” that simply dramatizes what has already happened behind closed doors • used processes reactively 	<p>Governmental actors should</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • proceed against public opinion when focused on long-term interests • communicate to the public earlier that “we” as a community have or foresee a problem that we need to collectively decide how to address • be publicly accountable
<p>Nongovernmental actors (individuals and groups) have</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • given input without understanding the complexity of the problem • been alerted too late after a decision is already “made” • been skeptical that processes are “shady,” and that the “city forced our hand” 	<p>Nongovernmental actors (individuals and groups) should</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sense the urgency of issues sooner to be able to have one’s say and be respected

The Evolving Narrative of a More Participatory Civic Culture

In listening to civic actors making sense of the Golf Course and the Community Jail, we found that individual stories combined to form complex narratives that reveal attitudes and hopes for how the community might engage in public problem-solving processes. These narratives are infused with insights regarding the influence of public input, the timing of public involvement, and the balancing of decision-making efficiency with growing public efficacy. They are shaped by how public problem-solving processes have unfolded in the past and are being reshaped by strong normative values as new experiences offer new possibilities for collaborative approaches that engage all actors. Aspirational narratives describe a well-informed, broadly focused public eager to participate early, and a patient set of government actors who meaningfully incorporate public involvement into important city decisions.

Table 2 presents a summary comparison of how the current narrative contrasts with the aspirational narrative. This contrast highlights a shift in the values seen as foundational for a participatory civic culture. The normative ideals offered seek to create a new narrative, a narrative with the power to “induce others to dwell in [it] to establish ways of living in common, in communities” (Fisher, 1987, p. 63).

Implications for Practitioners

In this study, we found that a complex array of values, beliefs, and perspectives were evident in the way community members talked about public problem-solving in the community. The stories they shared were influenced by several highly referenced public problem-solving events. The sensemaking about these events shaped the told and retold narratives in the community, inscribed with perceptions of past public decision-making processes and aspirational ideals for the future.

In this section, we argue that tracking these narrative threads provides important contextual information regarding community civic culture that aids the “thrown in” public dialogue and deliberation practitioners who otherwise might not understand how prevailing perceptions of decision-making processes came to be. We offer three suggestions for using these findings in practice.

Recommendations

Address narratives that disrupt dialogue and deliberation. Identifying critical moments in the public decision-making history of a community and understanding how these moments shape the civic culture of current public problem-solving processes equip practitioners for potentially disruptive moments that may arise in a facilitated process. For example, we, as practitioners, are now better equipped to recognize when process participants invoke the narratives informed by the Golf Course, which contain values that run counter to dialogue and deliberation. We can then adapt our facilitation to both create space for the feelings attached to those narratives but also to focus on the more positive, aspirational narratives desired after the Golf Course. No longer will the mere mention of “the Golf Course” necessarily precipitate feelings of frustration and recall an “us-versus-them” mentality. Instead, we can help participants reflect on how that

event became a critical moment when the community recognized the value and necessity of the public becoming more involved in public decision-making.

Drawing on the work of Jennifer Dodge (2014), practitioners can also shape processes that explicitly encourage participants to create their own storylines that provide a competing view of the public's role in public problem-solving. Since deliberative practitioners are committed to inclusive democratic practices, it may be helpful to provide space in process designs where participants can shape the "character of deliberative forums and enriching broader public dialogue" (Dodge, 2014, p. 182) to avoid reifying exclusionary structures.

Take time to clarify roles and state behavioral expectations. Understanding dominant narratives about public problem-solving processes also provided insights into how civic actors developed perceptions about one another's roles and the extent to which these perceptions undermined behavioral expectations. Knowing the gap between current roles and desired behaviors provides space for a process design where diverse civic actors share their perceptions about one another in a manner that recognizes the past but focuses on the future. For the community described by this study, this might entail a facilitated process where participants describe these gaps for both the self and others and then identify steps for shifting roles in a positive direction. In this way, we can create new pathways for sensemaking that use the past as a resource that maximizes forward movement. These processes should also include time for participants to state their roles as dictated by law and policy, particularly if their roles are as "government actors."

To further support clarifying roles and surfacing expectations, participatory processes should also clearly acknowledge the criteria to be used in making a final decision. Being clear about these roles and decision-making practices at the outset will build trust and encourage participation that keeps decision-making criteria in mind to guide public problem-solving.

Design processes that communicate contexts and complexities. Exploring the dominant narratives regarding public problem-solving in a community, both current and aspirational, raises awareness of the constraints and limitations civic actors see in one another. Gaining awareness of the roles that both public and government actors expect of each other based upon experience allows the practitioner to understand preexisting stereotypes and the history in which they are embedded. Subsequently, practitioners may design processes that discern between the real and perceived constraints and systems within which problems can be addressed and empower participants to help one another achieve the aspirational roles they hold for one another.

As we learned in this analysis, an underlying factor challenging effective dialogue and deliberation is the lack of information and knowledge about the issue and its decision-making context. Therefore, throughout a deliberative system, there must be quality information available about the contexts and constraints of public problem-solving. Public dialogue and deliberation practitioners can aid in this task by shaping processes in which government officials, municipal staff, and others take time to review the types of structural and policy constraints that exist *and* offer their views on the best places for citizens to impact long-term outcomes on a particular issue. If officials and staff authentically identify constraints *and* opportunities, this will build trust between government agencies, community groups, and community members and reshape these relationships as collaborative.

For example, in the community we accessed for this research, we heard about the challenge of educating the public in a short time period about the complexities of the issues. Therefore, practitioners need to create a dialogic space where education about systemic structures, laws, and regulations may occur. In the Community Jail situation, we could facilitate a process where participants first brainstorm solutions that address problems of the existing system and then think more broadly about larger, systemic transformations that might eliminate these issues altogether. Doing so raises awareness of issue complexity within a short time period while still generating movement through a deliberative space that can occur earlier in the broader decision-making process.

Conclusion

Our goal with this research was to better understand how community-based public problem-solving experiences in the past shape civic culture regarding dialogue and deliberation in the present and aspirations for the future. We found that taking the time to listen to past experiences and becoming more aware of how these examples underlie prevailing narratives provided important lessons regarding future dialogue and deliberation process designs. Knowing the critical moments that shape civic expectations in a community helps practitioners avoid having processes blindsided by a single utterance that transports longtime community members back to times of distrust and frustration and leaves newer community members searching for an explanation of what just happened. Having knowledge of these narratives also enables intentional process design that responds to the gaps uncovered between the real and the ideal in terms of civic actor roles.

For our colleagues in the dialogue and deliberation profession, we recommend that we revitalize our preprocess design data collection habits by creating spaces for key civic actors to share with us their stories of public life. As every community contains unique experiences and narratives, practitioners can tailor this approach by collecting data about what has happened in the past to more deeply understand participants' expectations. Let us take the time to ask our likely participants to describe the high and low moments as well as the perceptions and expectations they have for one another. At the same time, let us ask the same questions to relevant public servants to hear how they narrate their understanding of the community's civic culture. As Leonard Webster and Patricie Mertova (2007, p. 2) remind us:

People make sense of their lives according to the narratives available to them. Stories are constantly being restructured in the light of new events, because stories do not exist in a vacuum but are shaped by lifelong personal and community narratives... Narrative illustrates the temporal notion of experience, recognizing that one's understanding of people and events changes.

This approach acknowledges that the stories members of the public tell about themselves are not written in ink. Rather, the story is sketched in pencil and continuously revised.

Our research has shown that in the community of our study, the civic expectations have been shifting to a more inclusive approach to public problem-solving. However, there is more that can be done in this community, a community "still learning" to be more participatory and inclusive in addressing public problems. According to one interviewee, the community is "still in recovery from the golf course debacle" (Interviewee 12). However, these moments have also been imbued

with opportunity in the hands of the informed practitioner. “Sometimes you think, oh my gosh, will we ever live beyond the golf course? And other times I’m kind of glad it’s still out there a little bit because that was a real way that [citizens] made a difference” (Interviewee 17).

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