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Review of The Professionalization of Public Participation edited by Laurence Bherer, Mario Gauthier, and Louis Simard (New York: Routledge, 2017)

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Abstract

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Author Biography

Helen Christensen is a PhD Candidate at the Institute for Public Policy and Governance and the University of Technology Sydney. Her research is exploring the practice and professionalisation of community engagement in Australian local governments.

Keywords

public participation professional; public participation; citizen involvement; community engagement; professionalization

Public participation research has been dominated by examinations of practice and its role in public policy and administration. Apart from a handful of earlier contributions (Chilvers, 2008; Cooper & Smith, 2012; Hendriks & Carson, 2008; Lee, 2014, 2015; Lee et al., 2015) the role of the public participation professional (PPP) in this practice has been missed – an oversight considering the influence these practitioners wield over the processes they design, facilitate and report on. This changed a few years ago with the topic of PPPs gaining the attention of scholars at a symposium held at the 2014 Annual World Congress of the International Political Science Association (IPSA). This book is predominately the resulting work of that symposium.

There is no doubt that an investigation of PPPs is warranted, illustrated by the questions Bherer and colleagues pose in the introduction:

What are the effects of this professionalization of public participation? Does it compromise or support the democratic aims associated with public participation? How does the approach that PPPs take affect their abilities to design effective public participation mechanisms? (p.2)

While these questions are not answered decisively, the book does provide a profile of these professionals, the growth of their field, their role in the processes and the challenges they face.

Section I of the book consists of five chapters, each with a different country context and focus. In Chapter 2, “Innovating Public Participation: The Role of PPPs and Institutions in Italy”, Rodolfo Lewanski and Stafania Ravazzi examine how process design is influenced by looking at the culture of professionals and the institutional frameworks that promote and regulate the field in two regions in Italy. Alice Mazeud and Magali Nonjon look at the institutionalization of public participation in France in Chapter 3, “The Participatory Democracy Market in France: Between Standardization and Fragmentation”. They reveal that the market has grown in response to expanding state requirements but that this has led to standardization and homogenization of practice by PPPs and as a result the market is fragmenting. Mazeud and Nonjon also argue that to gain legitimacy, PPPs promote participatory democracy, thus fostering an artificial demand – a notion that some practitioners may find confronting but is a welcome contribution to the complexities of the space the PPPs hold between citizens and the institutions they serve. In Chapter 4, “Public Participation Professionals in the US: Confronting Challenges of Equity and Empowerment”, Caroline W. Lee reflects on the field in the United States and Canada and how the increase in professionalization of public participation practice has unexpectedly occurred in parallel with rising inequality and increasing democratic deficits. Lee argues that focus needs to shift from professionalization to democratizing access to the profession.

The editors raise the issues of commercialization and impartiality and outline four types of PPP personalities in Chapter 5, “Who’s the Client? The Sponsor, Citizens, or the Participatory Process?: Tensions in the Quebec (Canada) Public Participation Field.” The types are: the promoter, the reformer, the militant, and the facilitator. The authors, like others in the book, note the inconsistencies in how the profession is defined and the norms it shares – one the difficulties of research in this area. The section concludes with “Expertise, Professionalization, and Reflexivity in Mediating Public Participation” by Jason Chilvers, which gives an account of the professionalization of public participation in science and technology studies in the United Kingdom and the paradoxes present for practitioners in this space. Like Lee, he argues that the focus needs to shift from professionalization, where practitioners are focused on legitimating and defending their credibility. Chilvers believes the focus should instead shift to reflexivity – where the construction and co-production of publics, issues and formats of participation are constantly reflected on so that the real the implications and effects of public participation can be explored, questioned and responded to.

Section II consists of four chapters, this time with a focus on actors and networks, although once again in different country contexts. The section opens with Oliver Escobar’s “Making It Official: Participation Professionals and the Challenge of Institutionalizing Deliberative Democracy” – an examination of “official” public participation professionals (those employed in the public sector responsible for organising public processes across various policy areas within the institutional context government). Escobar discusses frictions experienced by this group; their impact on public sector governance practices, the conflict between participatory approaches and the established representative bureaucracies, and the role of the activist PPP who not only practices public participation but leads others on program of cultural change. Escobar’s contribution sheds light on these “unstated political workers and culture change agents” (p. 160).

Attentions shifts from the “official” PPPs to academics in Chapter 8’s discussion by David Kahane and Kristjana Loptson, “Negotiating Professional Boundaries: Learning from Collaboration between Academics and Deliberation Practitioners”. They explore the interface between academics and practitioners and academic-practitioners (whom are incidentally fast becoming known as ‘pracademics’ here in Australia) and report on three themes: difference in approaches to practices based on professional cultures, differing priorities around research, and evaluation and perceived benefits of academic and practitioner collaboration. In Chapter 9, “Making Citizen Panels a ‘Universal Bestseller’: Transnational Mobilization Practices of Public Participation Advocates,” Nina Amelung and Louisa Graber argue that participation instruments –in this case, citizens’ juries, planning cells and consensus

conferences – are standardizing on a transnational scale and may be having an adverse impact on their local and cultural contexts. Referring instead to public participation advocates, rather than professionals, the authors identify the establishment of “design schools” and outline how this standardization is resulting in principles and purposes getting lost in translation. The final chapter, “Learning to Facilitate: Implications for Skill Developing in the Public Participation Field” by Kathryn S. Quick and Jodi R. Sandfort focuses on the professionalization of the skill of facilitation reporting the findings of a study of ‘Art of Hosting’ training participants. The authors identify how participants transform knowledge acquired in the course and the complex nature of the skill. However, they stop short of discussing how the practice of this skill affects public participation processes. While the chapter is interesting from a practical point of view, extending this discussion would have enabled it to connect better with the rest of the book.

The book makes a series of solid conclusions about why public participation is professionalizing at such speed, the effects of standardization, and the fragility of the profession. It also outlines future research opportunities. It makes a valuable contribution to the growing body of work in this area.

There are, however, two missed opportunities. One is the limited regional focus, with case studies from the western established democracies of North America and Europe. Broadening to Asia, the Pacific and the South could allow for comparative observations.

The second, and perhaps more significant, missed opportunity is the omission of engaging in depth with literature and discussions on professional ethics. It is an area in which most authors make brief mention of and which may prove productive in moving the discussion forward. The editors note in the introduction that PPPs “do not share the same understanding of the aims of public participation, of the way to concretely put it into practice, or of their own role in this practice,” (p. 6) and this “fragility” is often viewed as the factor limiting the practice. Regardless of their understandings of the aims of the practice and their role in, PPPs are unique from other professions, as their role forces them to serve two masters. In other professions the public is served indirectly through the professional’s duty to their client or organization. PPPs however must directly serve their publics and their clients and organizations – an unavoidable and important ethical dilemma which hints to the larger questions posed in the introduction, i.e., ‘What are the effects of this professionalization of public participation? Does it compromise or support the democratic aims associated with public participation? How does the approach that PPPs take affect their abilities to design effective public participation mechanisms?’ (p. 2)

The editors and the authors should be commended, not only for their valuable contributions but for opening up the discussion about the role and importance of the public participation professional.

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