



Socio-spatial learning: A case study of community knowledge in participatory spatial planning



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ABSTRACT

This monograph looks at experiences of communities with spatial planning and applies those empirics to an underexplored area of participatory theory. While issues of power and communication have been well examined this work rests on the argument that the associated production of knowledge needs to be better understood. Theories of engagement draw on issues of 'voice' and the means to achieving deeper democracy. Similarly, participatory planning theories frame the debate in terms of communicative processes or competing rationalities. Within that body of work, however knowledge is seen as an adjunct of power and there is little focus on the spatial particularity of knowledges. In particular there has not as yet been a thorough study of how understandings of space are produced in a spatial planning context that includes lay participants. This monograph starts to broach that gap, conceptualising a potential 'socio-spatial learning' where community engagement is framed as a collaborative learning arena within spatial planning. Through an English case study it unpacks the dynamics between different types of knowledge around spatial planning where there is lay participation. This draws on two years of embedded observation within a joint planning unit and a review of the North Northamptonshire Core Strategy of 2008, which culminated in substantial community engagement work early in 2011. Findings indicate that local knowledge has a distinctive spatiality and that there is a clear role for lay knowledge in the context of spatial strategy-making. It is hoped that this work can help in understanding the production of planning knowledge, help identify non-tokenist engagement of the public, and inform interactions between communities and policy makers.

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1. Chapter 1

1.1. Introduction

This monograph asks 'how does learning with communities reframe spatial knowledge?' It begins from the understanding that planning is a knowledge-based profession concerned with space and that claims about the value to planning of community engagement need to be related to spatial learning. It takes an in-depth look at the communication between planners and the public through a unique embedded study of the knowledge(s) within collaborative and participatory work. The focus of recent work in this field has been on the improvement of specific outcomes, the resolution of conflict and the search for consensus. This has contributed to current thinking where lay participation in planning is increasingly expected but engagement exercises are not related specifically to producing knowledge of space for decision-making.

Since the nature of any 'learning value' is yet to be articulated with any specificity, the value of community engagement to learning about space is uncertain. The possibility of a productive interface between lay and planning actors is either assumed or ignored, since community engagement in planning is justified on the grounds of human rights and dignity, and increasing amounts of planning resources are being targeted at community involvement. In any case the argument is consistently made that the involvement of lay actors ought to have an impact on planners' thinking. The central concern of this study is therefore how such 'non-tokenist' participation, where it exists, has learning value for understanding space.

The nexus of planning theory around collaboration and spatial planning is deeply concerned with the 'outcomes' of both participation and planning. Participation can be and often is justified on democratic principles alone; however planning has both political and spatial power or at very least spatial as well as political aspects. The empowerment value is fundamental to community engagement, and this author's view is that cynicism will remain so long as the knowledge value of community

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engagement to planning is unclear. It is certainly an area that planning literature has not as yet considered in any depth. For these reasons, it is important to understand the effect of community knowledge on knowledge of space.

Planning knowledge appears as a theoretical construct within fields of vision about place, how these interact and how space is 'constructed'. As discussed in the following section, there is little focus on the learning potential within public participation, yet the implications for learning about space with communities is often alluded to. The argument put forward is that planning needs to more fully understand the interaction of different ways of understanding space and how different knowledges of space affect the production of spatial policies. To introduce this it is useful to briefly examine the work of the French philosopher Lefebvre, which continues to be a key reference in theorising on spatial planning (Holgersen, 2015; Pollock & Paddison, 2014) and social justice (Fainstein, 2010; Røe, 2014). In his seminal work, space is presented as a social product (Lefebvre, 1991) rather than a pre-existing ontological given, and therefore what constitutes 'space' is not fixed but fluid. This implies that there is no universal truth about space, only a series of occurrences where space and society mutually construct each other, affecting and producing each other. Consequently theories of society and space are presented as practically inseparable. To understand space then, Lefebvre suggests that we need to understand the ways it is constructed. Three ways are described: how it is perceived in daily life (spatial practices); as conceived by (e.g.) planners (representations of space); and lived space (spaces of representation) which is life "as directly lived through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of 'inhabitants' and 'users'" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 39). The importance of social production of shared understandings is a dominant theme in the more recent, relational approaches to spatial governance. As discussed below, it is cast as a vital component of spatial planning and social justice being either critically or normatively applied both to the substantive outcomes and to the processes of strategic spatial planning. Yet the existence of lay knowledge and the formative role of local communities' experiences in knowledges of space, that are so prominent in Lefebvrian analyses, have not been fully explored in planning theory. In response, the following chapters address the theoretical territory where lay knowledge and spatial governance converge, then present a unique English case study that unpacks the learning aspects of participatory contexts with and without communities. The lay knowledge of communities is examined as a facet of collaborative spatial planning.

2. Chapter 2

2.1. Participation and the uses of knowledge

Knowledge sits uncomfortably within planning theories of participation, from concerns around advocacy, through issues of equity, deliberation, collaboration, and continuing up to current reflections on forms and practice that might constitute a 'success'. As discussed here the focus of such work is on the close relationships within networks of power and on the effect of participation, in the form of deliberation, on institutions rather than on knowledge. A central concern is that this primarily characterises the general public as community groups differentiated by their relationships to dominant power structures. Concepts of control are strongly related to space, where dominant actors govern and manipulate a particular area, and knowledge is analysed as a means to disrupting and restablising networks. Although this understanding has critical value, it has come to obscure spatial rationality and dominated work in the area to the exclusion of concerns around its cognitive purpose in decisions for

spatial strategy. Participatory planning is conceived as a form of social learning with the potential for knowledge development, but theorising mainly relates to the structure, system and actors involved and knowledge in participatory planning is as yet underexplored. It overlooks the power of spatial knowledge in relation to planning challenges such as housing shortages and spatial issues such as the relationship between public transit provision and patterns of development.

There is a powerful vision in current planning theory of participation as tool of liberation, in which space is a secondary consideration at best. Critical focus falls on the close relationships within networks of power (Booher & Innes, 2002; Innes & Booher, 2004; Mirafab, 2004) and the effects of participation on institutions (Backlund & Mantysalo, 2010; Rydin & Pennington, 2000). Early literature on participation focused on notions of 'depth' and presented participation in decision-making as a means to redistributing power within the existing social order. The relative emancipatory effect of participation was seen to depend on the depth of participation, which is classically depicted using the metaphor of a ladder. Arnstein's ladder of participation (Arnstein, 1969) has been taken by many authors as the starting point for further theorising. It is based on eight progressive 'rungs' of participation (Citizen control, Delegated power, Partnership, Placation, Consultation, Informing, Therapy, Manipulation) along a sliding scale of depth categories (Non-participation, Tokenism, Citizen power) to demonstrate the degree to which power is transferred from process managers to those outside the process. Other ladders have since been produced and the continuing search for '21st century strategies' (Innes & Booher, 2004) now also considers the empowerment potential of new technologies such as online (Kingston, 2002; Kingston et al., 2000) or e-participation (Balla, 2012; Berry et al., 2011; Gençer & Oba, 2011). The bases of these evaluations are the extent to which individuals and different groups of people who are outside the decision-making processes are involved, and how their involvement can shape decisions. The assessment considers barriers to having an input to decisions. These are fundamental considerations, but they bracket out the spatial substance of deliberation.

The overarching rationale of participatory planning is to re-work conventions of social order. Drawing heavily on turn of the century foundations (Forester, 1999; Healey, 1997a; Sandercock, 1998), a collaborative mode of operation continues to be promoted (e.g. Innes & Booher, 2010) that does not assume that pre-set social structures apply to all actors. It is premised on redistributing power to less powerful actors by involving them in a new relational model of governing with a distinctive, egalitarian ideology. Governance is distinguished from government with all its connotations of fixed classes of governed and governing. It includes not just the state but also political and territorial communities in complex interactions between the state, the public realm and private spheres. This was a particular concern in the UK after the reforms of 2004, which put "heightened emphasis on stakeholder and community involvement" (Baker, Hincks, & Sherriff, 2010). Collaborative planning proponents embrace a strong role for the state, even if it sits within a framework of reduced meta-governance, or dispersed networks of power. As Healey puts it, "if we lose faith in our governance mechanisms, these conflicts will be resolved by the power of money and landownership" (Healey, 1997a). Participation is thus pitted against a neo-liberal agenda of reduced state intervention overall and seen as an alternative to laissez-faire forms. Critiques typically surround Marxist theory drawing heavily on Harvey (1973) and Castells (1972). Elwood (2002) and Sandercock (2004) for instance argue that participatory processes can be corrupted and easily aligned either with regressive policies of capital accumulation or the obscured retention of centralised control, or both. Fainstein

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