

Examining the role of context in the implementation of a deliberative public participation experiment: Results from a Canadian comparative study

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Abstract

To resolve tensions among competing sources of evidence and public expectations, health-care managers and policy makers are turning more than ever to involve the public in a wide range of decisions. Yet efforts to use research evidence to inform public involvement decisions are hampered by an absence of rigorous public participation evaluation research. In particular, greater rigour in exploring the roles played by different contextual variables—such as characteristics of the *issue* of interest, the *culture* of the sponsoring organization and attributes of the *decision* being made—is needed. Using a comparative quasi-experimental design, we assessed the performance of a generic public participation method implemented in 5 Canadian regionalized health settings between 2001 and 2004. Participant and decision-maker perspectives were assessed and, through direct observation, the roles exerted by contextual variables over the public involvement processes were documented and analysed. Our findings demonstrate that a generic public participation method *can* be implemented in a variety of contexts and with considerable success. Context exerts fostering and inhibiting influences that contribute to more (or less) successful implementation. Public participation practitioners are encouraged to pay careful attention to the types of issues and decisions for which they are seeking public input. Sufficient organizational resources and commitment to the goals of the public participation process are also required. Attention to these contextual attributes and their influence on the design and outcomes of public participation processes is as important as choosing the “right” public participation mechanism.

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Introduction

To resolve tensions among competing sources of evidence and public expectations, health-care managers and policy makers are turning more than ever to involve the public in a wide range of decisions

from research funding and production (O'Donnell & Entwistle, 2004; Pivik, Rode, & Ward, 2004; Royle & Oliver, 2004) to planning, priority setting and resource allocation (Abelson, Eyles, McLeod, Collins, & Forest, 2003; Abelson, Forest et al., 2003; Mitton & Donaldson, 2002; Pivik, 2002; Wiseman, Mooney, Berry, & Tang, 2003). Yet efforts to use research evidence to inform public involvement decisions have been hampered by the absence of rigorous public participation evaluation research (OECD, 2005). Despite a long history of experimentation, we still know very little about what does and does not work when it comes to designing public involvement processes; what impacts these processes have on public participants, decision makers and decision making or how these processes are shaped and constructed by the different contexts within which they are implemented. As interest in and pressure to involve the public more meaningfully in health-care decision making continues to grow, this evidence gap poses frustrating barriers to decision makers looking to draw transferable lessons to inform the design of public participation processes. We address this gap by reporting the findings from a comparative evaluation of public participation in 5 Canadian provinces. A specific emphasis of the paper is to document and interpret the role of multiple contexts in shaping the design, implementation and evaluation of public involvement processes.

Literature review and conceptual issues

Many of the challenges first ascribed to public participation evaluation over 25 years ago (Rosener, 1981) continue to plague the field today. Participation is still a complex and value-laden concept, with multiple purposes, meaning, levels and methods. But convergence among public participation scholars and practitioners, around a common set of public participation frameworks and typologies, seems close at hand (IAP2, 2005; Rowe & Frewer, 2005). Moreover, some of the pioneering evaluation frameworks (Webler, 1995) have been tested and incrementally improved through application with notable contributions from the fields of science, technology and environmental policy, each with long histories of public participation (Beierle & Cayford, 2002; Petts, 2001; Rowe, Marsh, & Frewer, 2004, 2000). These frameworks also resonate with decision makers' and citizens' views about what might constitute "successful public

participation" (Abelson, Forest, Eyles, Casebeer, & Mackean, 2004; Forest, Abelson, Gauvin, Martin, & Eyles, 2003; Lowndes, Pratchett, & Stoker, 2001; Sargeant & Steele, 1999).

While there have been determined efforts to improve the rigour of public participation evaluation, most evaluations still fail to provide decision makers with the research evidence they need to inform subsequent public involvement processes. This is due, in part, to imprecise and inconsistent terminology used to describe and categorize public involvement *methods* and the *contexts* within which they are implemented (Rowe & Frewer 2004). With more explicit descriptions of participatory mechanisms and their associated contextual attributes, improved theory building about what works and under which circumstances should follow. For example, there is now broader acceptance of three major groupings of methods: citizen engagement, consultation and communication (OECD, 2001; Rowe & Frewer, 2005). Each of these approaches is distinguished by the degree to which the public is engaged in the process (i.e., as full and equal partners, as consultants or as recipients of information, respectively). Similarly, categories of *contextual attributes* associated with the implementation of public involvement processes could also be developed. These might include, for example, characteristics of the *issue* (e.g., large vs. small scale, degree of scientific uncertainty, information requirements associated with the issue), the *culture* of the sponsoring organization (e.g., leadership style, level of commitment to and resources available for public involvement) or attributes of the *decision* being made (e.g., type of decision, timeframe, etc.) (Einsiedel, 2002). Efforts to systematically account for context in this way have focused on discerning the relative influences of *community* (i.e., social and structural), *institutional* (i.e., organizational enablers) and *political* contexts on community-wide decision-making processes (Abelson, 2001). While providing a helpful heuristic for documenting the roles of different contextual attributes, these types of frameworks fall short of providing evaluative guidance regarding which contexts are associated with which public participation outcomes (Beierle & Cayford, 2002).

Recent scholarly attention given to understanding how context mediates the production of evidence to inform and guide policy offers another source of guidance (Dobrow, Goel, & Upshur, 2004; Lomas, Culyer, McCutcheon, McAuley, & Law for the

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