

Chapter draft, *The Community Development Reader*

**DOING DEMOCRACY UP-CLOSE:  
CULTURE, POWER, AND COMMUNICATION  
IN COMMUNITY PLANNING**

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## **DOING DEMOCRACY UP-CLOSE:**

### **CULTURE, POWER, AND COMMUNICATION IN COMMUNITY PLANNING**

The planner who approaches the cultural framework with technical expertise alone soon finds others' perceptions of his role quite narrow and his operating arena and impact highly circumscribed...On the other hand, focusing on process alone limits the planner to symbolic emotional support roles and unduly hampers his capacity for professional judgment...

Bolan, "Community Decision Behavior: The Culture of Planning" (1969,308)

Decades have passed since Bolan insisted that planners be more than technicians or sources of "emotional support" in the communities in which they work, and the stakes are higher than ever. With ethnic diversity on the rise in traditional "settler states" such as the United States, Canada, and Australia, as well as in Europe, and with increased attention to diversity in many younger democracies in the developing world, professionals and others engaged in local planning and problem-solving (hereafter, "planners") face higher expectations that they behave in culturally competent ways and promote more inclusive decisionmaking (Sandercock 2000). This is perhaps most visible in the ways that planners communicate and handle power dynamics within and among groups. Yet despite relevant and even provocative contributions in planning theory and the social sciences over the past two decades, there has been remarkably little effort to examine culture and power in face-to-face communication, such as in the planning meetings on which so much local work hinges. More specifically, researchers have often treated these topics as abstractions for theorizing, not as concrete problems and opportunities for the planners involved (Forester 1985). Many practitioners, for their part, have either adopted "cookbook" recipes for handling groups and situations (generic rules for facilitating successful meetings or resolving disputes, for example) or have generated a rich craft knowledge from trial and error—but not necessarily in forms that are conscious, shareable, and open to debate.

I focus on face-to-face planning episodes and planners' choices within them, examining a brief ethnographic account of talk-based, face-to-face interactions or "speech occasions" (Austin 1961; Searle 1969). The accounts are derived from my fieldnotes as consultant to a large-scale, multi-neighborhood community planning and development initiative in a northeastern U.S. city. I emphasize that planners and other public service professionals should seek to understand and respond to the diverse communication codes and subtle power relations that shape face-to-face encounters, and I provide advice on how to do both (for details, see Briggs 1998). Such understanding and response—"knowing-in-practice," to use Schön's (1982) phrase—are especially crucial where planners aim to get results while meaningfully involving various "publics" or stakeholders in decisionmaking. Those efforts requires effective practices and constant learning, not just having the right values. Otherwise, many face-to-face interactions in a diverse society will struggle along at needlessly high levels of confusion, distrust, and even resentment. The risk and opportunities entailed in such interactions are especially significant when planners enter disadvantaged areas, as is the case with many community planning efforts. But the principles developed here apply to most face-to-face encounters and are part of a larger effort to free planning in democratic societies from communication "distortions" (Forester 1989), not to mention irrelevance.

### **Why Community Planning is Important and Hard**

Increased social diversity—in the U.S., it comes alongside growing economic inequality—has sharpened the focus on politics and public participation in local planning and decisionmaking in democratic societies. Friedmann (1987,14), for example, argues that the pace of change and complexity of problems in the public arena call for "a renewal of politics, initially at the local scale of citizen encounters." Innes (1996) offers consensus building, and underscores

the role of “communicative action” (Innes 1995), to redefine the ideal of effective planning. Influential voices outside the planning field likewise agree that strong democracy is threatened by the loss of activities and associations that engage people locally, face-to-face (Barber 1984; Fung 2004). Renewed efforts now aim quite often to build local social cohesion or “social capital” (Putnam 2000), empowerment and “community capacity” (Chaskin et al. 2001).

Democracy is a labor intensive business, especially in diverse societies. But relatively little action-oriented research has considered how to make that business work at the micro level, face to face, through talk—with planning or policymaking as a part. For the most part, we have “how to” guides on public meetings and other media that are terse on points of power and culture. In general, rhetoric is rarely studied today, as it was 2,000 years ago, notes Brown (1983,136), “to explain the relationships between the practice of language and the exercise of power.”

This study thus addresses an important gap in research and reflective practice, using a major community planning initiative to highlight cross-cultural confusion, power relations, and other problems in face-to-face meetings and, to a lesser degree, the contexts that surround them. For my purposes here, “community planning” is synonymous with “neighborhood planning”: efforts by which residents and others in a spatially defined area, often working in tandem with planning professionals, seek to develop a blueprint for their collective future—to protect what they have and secure improvements in their quality of life. In America, the roots of such planning efforts run deep, at least as far back as the reformist era of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, when settlement houses began to appear in crowded industrial cities (Rohe and Gates 1985). Community planning is policy development on the micro level, often with deliberation at its heart, but it is also an effort by local stakeholders to write themselves a story.

Baum (1997,295), in a detailed study of two community planning processes in Baltimore, describes such planning as the effort to help move residents' conversations with themselves and with technical experts from "communities of memory" to future-oriented "communities of hope." At all stages, clear, trustworthy face-to-face communication among actors is crucial to getting significant and sustainable results.

There are several reasons for which community planning, after roughly two decades in obscurity, is once again attracting great interest nationwide. First, where such planning is participatory, it reflects a broad effort to shift public and private decisionmaking toward models that favor stakeholder involvement, from site-based management in business to models for "reinventing government" (Fung 2004; Osborne 1993). Second, community planning is increasingly prescribed as a trigger for efforts to revitalize low-income urban neighborhoods, and life in such neighborhoods came back on the screen politically in the 1990s.

But as Chaskin (2005) observes, many community planning processes face powerful tensions between *democracy* (the ethos of associational action) and *bureaucracy* (the imperatives of programs, budgets, and expectations from funders and other external authorities). Grassroots activists, who founded community-based organizations to plan for and revitalize forgotten neighborhoods, now worry that some of these organizations have outgrown their constituencies (Gonzalez 1993). Mayors and planning departments worry, as before, that local visions will favor parochial interests over citywide priorities. And those who engage in community planning, whether as consultants, public officials, or citizen planners, worry, as always, that the fruit of their efforts may occupy little more than shelf space.

Whereas earlier research and commentary on community planning focused squarely on issues of culture, power, conflict, and the legitimacy of the planner's role (e.g., Peattie 1969;

Rein 1969; Arnstein 1969; Bolan 1969; Ecklein and Lauffer 1972), most recent work celebrates programmatic best practices or stories of winning advocacy campaigns. With a few notable exceptions, this work is quite journalistic, thin on concepts to guide analysis or show why the “formulas” fail in some contexts. Descriptive accounts and professional primers, both old and new, mostly allude to the miscommunication, cross-cultural gaps, and subtle power relations that characterize public encounters. Fortunately, a large body of research in anthropology, communication, sociolinguistics, and sociology has addressed these issues in detail.

### **Preview and Approach**

I examine a single planning episode, emphasizing how key aspects of community planning practice reflect the dynamics of “social performance”: socially organized, politically subtle, culturally shaped, and talk-based public interactions or speech occasions in which participants play roles much like performers in a play (Goffman 1959). I focus on broad patterns of social performance common to a range of face-to-face citizen encounters in which planners and other public service professionals may find themselves, not the intricacies of group behavior generally, to which a vast and distinct literature is devoted. The speech occasion presented below was edited from fieldnotes I took as consultant to a large-scale planning process in five densely populated, high-poverty, predominantly African-American and Latino neighborhoods in a single city (I use pseudonyms for person and place names below). I am a mixed-race, male planner, and these ethnographic accounts—drawing on both participant observation and informal (naturalistic) interviewing—are, by nature, personalistic and subject to interpretive bias.

### **Looking for a Common Code: Communication, Culture and Confusion**

It’s 8:30 PM on a mid-winter night in the Clydewood neighborhood, an overwhelmingly African-American and Latino area where almost half the population lives below the poverty line. The planning task force made up of residents and chaired by a local community development corporation (CDC) is

meeting for the third time at a neighborhood youth center. The room is small for the 16 persons present, and long tables have been arranged in a “U” shape to face the front. Fred, the CDC executive director, chairs the meeting, welcoming participants, reminding residents of the larger objectives, and leading everyone in a prayer at the start, group hug at the close. Like most of the task force members, he is African-American and over 50. Two hired planning consultants are standing: Julio, a 30ish Hispanic planner, is facilitating, and Karen, a white Anglo (non-Hispanic) planner in her mid-40s, is recording comments on large sheets of butcher-block paper on the wall. The planners met with Fred before the meeting to go over meeting roles and review a tentative agenda. Julio and the residents are doing most of the talking. He asks general questions about social services in the area and probes on their responses; from time to time, he encourages residents to explore different topics and to modify the comments recorded. Midway through the meeting, the group is discussing the rehabilitation and conversion of an abandoned city-owned building for use as a youth center. Shari, one of only two teenagers present, is standing in one corner as she expresses strong concerns that the facility be designed with youth [“users” in the planning jargon] in mind. She is African-American, 17 years old. “Y’all gotta listen to the young people; we don’t never get anything made for us right! Don’t never get asked...” Shari, who stands a slender but strong 6-foot-2, is pumping the air with her outstretched fingers and moving her head from side to side across her shoulders for emphasis. I make a mental note that her body is saying as much as her mouth. Julio asks her to be more specific about how the proposed youth facility should be designed: “Ok, so what do you want to see there? Enter it in your mind’s eye - what does it look and feel like?” Based on earlier conversations and her comment a moment ago, I get the sense that this is a question Shari is seldom asked, and Shari seems caught off guard. She is still and silent as Julio probes further. I see that Karen is staring at Shari and quivering with (what looks like) fear. Later, when the meeting is wrapped up, I confer privately with Karen, who tells me how threatened she felt by Shari’s behavior. Julio and I then talk to her about the verbal and nonverbal cues that different people use to communicate. Julio said that he “read” Shari as emphatic, impassioned but not at all threatening to the planners or process.

In this encounter, a technically able planner, due perhaps to her life stage, as well as her class and ethnic background, was unable to decode the speech of a community resident, a young woman who, among other contributions, played an important “bridging” role, connecting the local task force to youth in her neighborhood. Far from being threatening, Shari was, by local reputation, an ambitious and outspoken leader among her peers—well-liked by local leaders and

by project staff because she cared deeply about the issues our planning effort emphasized. To Karen, though, Shari's emphatic outburst connoted threat. Because Shari was (literally) standing tall in a sit-down meeting, and because her body language underlined her strong feelings about the issues at hand, Karen was silent and visibly on edge for the remainder of the meeting.

Planning efforts struggle over situations like this one, wherein planners: (a) differ from other meeting participants in their sense of the proper bounds of the social performance and of the various aims of social actors in the situation; and (b) fail to reliably *decode* the speech of their resident constituents, let alone *encode* their own speech for those constituents to understand (the latter being a feedback problem not evident in the narrative above but one with which Karen struggled in many other instances). These problems, different *conceptions* about what is to come in a meeting and *code confusion* once talk begins, can have devastating effects, alienating participants, threatening the trust needed to develop and act on plans collaboratively over time, and inhibiting valuable exchange and learning.

Speech occasions like the one presented above are "socially performed." People (social actors) assume roles in face-to-face interaction in order to manage the impressions of fellow actors (Goffman 1959). Moreover, social actors rely on verbal and nonverbal forms or "codes" that are familiar to them (Hymes 1974; Kochman 1981). Goffman's performance framework captures the broad parameters of the situation: Actors seek to manage the impression of other actors, not necessarily to manipulate but to maintain a normal, understandable exchange, in other words to "uphold the situation" (Goffman 1971,23). Code concepts, on the other hand, reveal the substance of communication and confusion, as well as specific talk strategies within those parameters.

For example, the planners described above wanted to project objectivity and respect for resident views while steering discussion in ways that informed their work, and these planners may not have reached a tacit *or* explicit consensus on these situational, as opposed to technical, aims in advance, despite the pre-meeting. Based on later observation and informal interviews, the residents present brought a range of intentions: to project authority as the “old guard,” to ensure that younger voices were not suppressed by these older figures, and so on. Staff added more unstated agendas. Conversations with Karen reflected scant awareness on her part of these multiple agendas and role performances, above and beyond the factual exchange assumed by rational theories of planning and policymaking, in which participation merely generates “input.”

The raw material of the encounter consisted largely of verbal and nonverbal communication organized along ethnic, class, institutional, and other dimensions. The following basic concepts will help us analyze this episode: *Scripts* are the conventions or expectations that different actors bring to a particular face-to-face encounter (community task force meeting, public hearing at city hall, etc.), and *codes* are the specific linguistic forms used to talk (Saville-Troike and Kleifgen 1986). The evidence is that Karen and Shari differed according to the scripts they brought to the meeting—their expectations as to appropriate behavior, what constitutes *emphasis* versus *threat*, and so on—as well as the codes they employed, both verbally and nonverbally. More specifically, Karen felt threatened by Shari’s volume and emphatic tone, as well as her nonverbal signals: standing for emphasis, pumping the air with her hands, swaying her head from side-to-side as she looked at the planners—in other words, by a style of face-to-face rhetoric rooted in ethnicity and social class (Kochman 1981; Gumperz 1982). Karen’s script also reflected an institutional logic: her tendency to focus on what Chaskin (2005) labels

“bureaucracy” in community planning (budgetary and programmatic imperatives) rather than democracy (collective voice and action).

Typical of such confusion, neither Shari nor Karen were aware that there was a communication problem, nor that code confusion could change the outcomes of the meeting, as well as future relations among the actors involved (Hymes 1974; Wolfgang 1979). When planners and other actors in a social setting share life stage, ethnicity, class level, and other social traits, the chance for code confusion and mistaken intentions are much reduced: *codes and scripts will largely coincide in homogeneous settings*. But in the practice of community planning, so often conducted across these social borders, common communication conventions can hardly be assumed.

### ***Options for Action***

What to do? Discussions, whether public or private, about acceptable conventions (scripts), along with the range of forms (codes) to expect, would have helped Shari, Karen, and others to exchange information.<sup>1</sup> This is part of the “norming” that groups can do in advance of their work together (Hackman 1990). Forester (1989) has called explicitly for a focus on planning as mutual “sense making.” But to norm and make sense together effectively, actors involved in a situation must be aware that scripts exist and have some sense of what their own scripts include.

In general, when verbal and nonverbal behavior are confusing and even threatening, ask insiders what they think such behavior means, and be ready for a range of answers. While I am not suggesting that planners become behavioral scientists, the field researcher’s healthy concern for the range of cultural assumptions present in a setting like the one described, and a willingness to ask elementary questions, can go a long way (Lofland and Lofland 1995). Although one may

trigger suspicion and defensiveness with probing inquiry, my experience is that most people understand the need to get second opinions about “what went on” (to debrief an encounter) and, further, that people appreciate being counted enough to offer their insights. A few relatively neutral probes that might have been helpful for Karen, with or without her colleagues’ input after the meeting, include the following:

What did Shari mean when she said “young people never get asked”?

Shari, what did you mean when you said ...? Say more about ...

Do other young people feel strongly about that?

I don’t know about that [issue/sentiment]. What’s that all about?

Although social performances and code clashes can be terribly confusing, we nevertheless tend to actively *fit* meanings to them, to make sense of them, rightly or wrongly, based on prior experiences (Garfinkel 1967). If code and other performance problems are therefore common but fairly invisible to the key actors involved, all sides of the encounter may become even angry, not just uncomfortable, because actors tend to read intentions into what has “gone wrong” in the interaction (Erickson 1979,122). These stand-offs are, at worst, highly paternalistic and parochial on the part of outsiders with authority (“these community people don’t know what they want, their ideas aren’t helpful, and they don’t see the bigger picture,” or “we could never get that past the board!”) and resentful in the view of residents (“those racist ‘experts’ are at it again, they don’t know what I know and don’t care to learn it”). Such inferences may confirm the worst fears and preconceptions each side of the interaction has about the other.

Where *decoding* is concerned, because social meanings are subject to various filters, it is critical, as suggested above, to ask various actors—young and old, richer and poorer, newcomers and long-termers, from various ethnic groups—what means what and what actors intend. As for

*encoding* effectively, planners who are able to “code switch” to make themselves understood in particular settings bring undeniable advantages to these encounters. This practice, also known as “style switching,” was first documented by researchers among African-Americans (Mitchell-Kernan 1972), but is practiced by members of various groups who navigate across boundaries of communication. Moreover, “going street”—an informal way to describe switching from standard American English to a particular group’s dialect—was described in literature long before social scientists deemed the phenomenon important enough to study. It is a survival skill for people who must function in two or more social worlds or “speech communities” (Gumperz 1968), each with its preferred patterns of communication. As I have elaborated elsewhere (Briggs 1998), power dynamics, and notable power imbalances, are often at play in these encounters as well.

These concepts focus attention on the understandable differences that human actors bring to these settings and away from simplistic analyses that hold confusion and anger to be—always and everywhere—signs of conscious prejudice or the will to dominate.

## **Discussion and Implications**

I could have subtitled this chapter “trouble at community meetings.” Planners, especially those working in neighborhoods or other field settings, are often called upon to be more than informed technicians, to assume a variety of public roles that support effective communication and shared decisionmaking processes. But knowing what you don’t know is important, and the largely unrecognized dynamics I have examined here are also important, for reasons of legitimacy as well as effectiveness. Our still insufficient attention to the links among communication, culture, and power, reinforces the belief that, like the stereotypical technicians of old, planners and policy professionals work top-down and write technical reports, diagnosing

social problems and removing pathology “over there,” with little consideration to local knowledge, values, or culture (Gans 1968; Scott 1998; Tauxe 1995). We cannot simply ignore the performance aspects of face-to-face interactions or prescribe formulaic responses to the challenges examined here. Nor should we simply retreat to value statements about how important it is to engage the public in decisions that matter. Rather, we should collect and share principles for reading communication codes and power relations, especially in multicultural settings, and for responding in ways that promote mutual learning. Such competence is critical for doing democracy “up close” in a world of diverse publics and complex public problems.□

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<sup>1</sup> In other sessions, we, the consultant team, shared with participants some of our conventions for communicating and listening during the meeting and asked about their expectations. We also debriefed amongst ourselves after each meeting and shared the tasks of checking our interpretations of events with other actors involved. Time and role, of course, constrained us in all of these efforts.