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## Communicating Trust, Community, and Process in Public Meetings: A Reflection on How Close Attention to Communication Can Contribute to the Future of Public Participation

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## Communicating Trust, Community, and Process in Public Meetings: A Reflection on How Close Attention to Communication Can Contribute to the Future of Public Participation

### Abstract

This concluding essay reflects on how the essays included in this special issue can help address some prevailing issues in public participation scholarship. We see three themes running through the contributions to this special issue that are particularly important for public participation scholars and practitioners to consider. These issues are: citizens' distrust of public officials, concerns about who counts as a legitimate member of the community, and challenges related to the framing the process and goals of the meeting. In this concluding essay we summarize and reflect on the insights provided by the special issue contributions. We also look ahead to assess how these contributions can inform future public participation research and practice by illuminating the importance of communication practices and public meeting formats.

### Keywords

communication, community, deliberation, participation process, public meetings, trust

In the introductory essay for this special issue, we reflected on the IJP2 editors' comments that the field of public participation is at a point where it needs maturity and development (Glock-Gruneich & Ross, 2008; see also Pyser, 2009). The essays included in this special issue contribute to conceptual development through providing a great deal of close attention to the communication practices that occurred during one public meeting. The authors who examined this North Omaha Development Project public meeting all highlighted different communicative practices, yet their insights center on three major issues central to the field of public participation. These issues are a distinct lack of *trust* between community members and the presenters (public officials and their hired consultants), disagreements on the nature of *community* in this project, and a contested understanding of the *participatory process* of this meeting and its intended goals and outcomes.

Issues of trust, community, and participatory practice are central to field of public participation. They are essential for legitimizing public participation efforts, particularly public meetings, and are important for us to reckon with as a field. For conceptual maturity, public participation scholars and practitioners ought to be able to not only articulate the key components of the field, such as trust, community, and participatory practice, but also have a clear understanding of how these components are created, maintained, and challenged in the everyday communication that happens during public meetings.

In a way, the essays in this special issue reaffirm some of what we see as consistent challenges in public meetings. Community members have a difficult time trusting public officials (Webler & Renn, 1995), community members often believe their perspectives do not matter in the long run, or that public officials have already made up their minds by the time the meeting is held (McComas, 2003; McComas, Besley, & Trumbo, 2006), and the public hearing model is not ideal for fostering deliberative discussion and public engagement (Gastil, 2000), as President Obama discovered in the 2009 Town Halls on health care (Hierbacher, 2009). The essays provided in this special issue provide concrete evidence of these challenges, and offer some insights into what happened during this meeting that contributed to such challenges.

Yet, the essays also make a unique contribution to the body of work on public participation by scrutinizing specific communicative aspects that seemed to be particularly salient, and troubling, for the people who attended this public meeting. In particular, the essays

draw attention to how people talked about the social groups present in the meeting, the status associated with the different groupings, the presenters' nonverbal behavior, the presenters' responses to expression of distrust, the language choices speakers made when framing the purpose of the meeting, and the stories community members told about their own experiences in the neighborhood. Each of the communication aspects examined in this special issue holds important lessons with the potential to reach beyond the walls of this particular meeting.

### **Communicating Trust, Community, and Meeting Process**

The articles in this issue provide a window into how communication practices manifest issues such as trust/mistrust, the boundaries and values of a community, and the intended format and purpose of the public meeting itself. All three of these issues influence how public issues are discussed and what outcomes are viewed as legitimate or appropriate for the public meeting.

#### **Trust**

Trust in public officials and commitment to the process are crucially important for success of public meetings. As Kelshaw and Gastil (2007) indicate, the perceptions and expectations meeting attendees bring with them to a public meeting “shape the way that public meetings play out, in terms of both process and products” (2007, p. 9). Of particular importance, argue Kelshaw and Gastil, are the participants' expectations and perceptions of the meeting goals, the direction of communication in the meeting, the content of the communication, and the physical, psychological, and socio-cultural contexts surrounding the public meeting.

In the NODP meeting we saw very strong evidence of audience members distrusting the presenters, and it seems likely this lack of trust was based on what audience members expected and perceived related to the Chamber of Commerce and consultants' actions at the meeting. The essays by Witteborn and Sprain, Jarmon, and Plummer unpack some of the participants' displays of distrust during the meeting and the responses by the meeting presenters. In particular, these authors note several factors contributing to the public's lack of trust were the audiences' perception that the presenters had total control over the meeting agenda, the apparent manipulation of the question cards, the PowerPoint presentations, and the lack of understanding and devaluation of the local community perspectives. Audience members challenged the presenters' understanding of the community and the goal of the meeting itself, which are

described in more detail below. These issues highlighted the lack of trust apparent at the meeting. In short, audience members seemed to be asserting that if presenters did not understand the history and values of the local community, they could not be trusted.

One particular instance focused on by several essays in this issue was the lengthy speech by Dick Davis in which he responds to some of the expressions of distrust by trying to build identification with audience/community. The essays in this issue examine how Davis' use of inclusive pronouns ("we" and "our"), as well as his ability to demonstrate connection to the local community, were efforts to garner the audience members' trust. Davis was more successful at building trust than the other presenters not only because of his skill as a rhetor, but also because of his unique social location as both a member of the presentation team and also someone who has connections with the North Omaha community. Davis' speech, and the other communication acts highlighted in these essays, point to the importance of trust as a foundational element in public meetings, and the difficulties faced by meeting organizers and presenters if trust is not established.

### **Community: Sense of Place and Community Values**

The second issue highlighted in many of these essays is the sense of community. One aspect of understanding the importance of "community" at this meeting is ascertaining its boundaries and its members. For example, several of the authors indicate that questions such as "Who counts as a member of the community?" were disputed during the meeting and seemed important in determining the status of the participants, whose voice was most important, and who should be allowed to participate in the planning for future economic development.

The essays by Black, Cockett, and Witteborn and Sprain note the distinction between insiders and outsiders was important to meeting participants. This distinction was evident in the stories meeting participants told and also in the questions audience members asked. Witteborn and Sprain indicate the "grouping processes" audience members used to categorize the participants during this meeting were clearly linked to issues of trust, as described above. Insider status came predominantly from spatial location (i.e., living within the "target area"), but issues of race and history in the neighborhood were also important. To be marked as an insider, or a real community member, afforded one with some legitimacy and status in the interaction. In contrast, those who were outsiders, including some members of the NODP who were leading the meeting,

were discursively constructed as untrustworthy and not legitimate members of the public and, therefore, who should not have voice in the decision making.

Another central issue in understanding how community was important during this meeting is getting a sense for community values. For example, Black's essay on storytelling notes the values of community members could be heard in their stories of personal experiences in the neighborhood. Witteborn and Sprain's essay indicates that during the NODP public meeting there seemed to be a difference between audience members and presenters in the extent to which local knowledge and experiences were valued. Both of these essays demonstrate the discourse of audience members expressed concern about racism, a lack of economic opportunity, and levels of violent crime in the neighborhood. Yet, the NODP presenters focused on economic development without adequately recognizing and responding to the community members' concerns about racism and crime. The lack of connection to community values creates a situation where audience members are skeptical of the meeting goals and the expected outcomes, which is evident in several of the interactions studied in this special issue.

### **Meeting Process and Goals**

Finally, these essays indicate the communication during the NODP public meeting provided a questionable and contested framing of the participatory process and the goals for the meeting. Several essays describe how the meeting format, which is similar to a public hearing, created a clear delineation between the community members (as audience) and the NODP presenters (as officials, leading the meeting). As Cockett's analysis indicates, there is a high level of inequality in the distribution of speaking turns with NODP presenters talking the most frequently and the most often. Community input came after the formal presentation by the consultants hired by NODP, and this input was framed as a question and answer session where community members offer questions or comments to be responded to by NODP representatives not only in the meeting, but also after the meeting had concluded. In other words, the NODP team was simply collecting many of the cards. Thus, the format and the overall communication pattern cemented a clear power difference between the conveners of the meeting and the community members in the audience.

Moreover, some aspects of the communication content and wording served to frame the purpose of the meeting in ways that were not, perhaps, consistent with what the NODP

presenters actually did. For instance, Leighter and Castor argue, the metacommunication evident in the meeting demonstrated the NODP presenters and audience members each framed the communication expectations of the meeting differently. Although the NODP presenters framed the meeting as an opportunity for two-way, interactive communication, the audience members framed the same interactions as one-way communication coming from the NODP and directed to the audience. Similarly, Witteborn and Sprain note the language choices of NODP presenters also framed the meeting by marking what topics were deemed as appropriate to discuss.

Another important aspect of meeting process pointed out by Leighter and Castor is the way in which the NODP presenters argued for both patience from the participants and the legitimacy of the overall process by suggesting there had been and will be many more public meetings. This rhetorical strategy fell flat and the reason it did makes sense. If the participants were disappointed with the meeting they themselves were attending, why would the promise of more meetings, perhaps just like this one, be a compelling reason to believe in the process?

Finally, the essays highlight how some nonverbal behavior of the presenters framed the participant roles and the meeting process. Plummer and Jarmon both describe how the presenters' handling of the question cards made it seem like they were screening audience members' questions and choosing which ones to answer. Similarly, these authors point out that NODP presenters differed from audience members in attire (NODP presenters in suits, community members dressed casually) and physical location in the room (NODP presenters in the front of the room, sometimes standing in what Jarmon calls a "wall of suits"), which highlighted their status differences and further supported the interpretation of the meeting as a one-way communication event.

In sum, the essays in this special issue remind us that the core issues of public participation are created and maintained through communication. In this meeting we saw *trust*, *community*, and *public process* manifested, contested, and negotiated through the languaged interaction during the meeting. The interactions highlight participants' roles, meeting format and goals, and in this case ultimately challenged the legitimacy and success of the public participation process. The communication of trust, community, and participation constrain what topics are appropriate for discussion, who ought to be involved in the decision-making, and what actions participants see as legitimate meeting outcomes. In the NODP public meeting the distinctions between the social groups, the lack of trust, and the contested framing of the purpose of the meeting created

significant challenges for the NODP. In the following section we reflect on implications of these essays by considering what different choices could have been made to make the meeting more successful and what public participation scholars and practitioners can take from these analyses to further advance the field.

### **Implications for Public Meeting Practice**

Recently, a number of members from the International Association for Public Participation, the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation (NCDD) and others collaborated on a set of Core Principles of Public Engagement. These principles offer what the collaborative group of authors “consider to be the fundamental components of quality public engagement” and “reflect the *common* beliefs and understandings of those working in the fields of public engagement, conflict resolution, and collaboration” (NCDD Website, Core Principles for Public Engagement). As fundamental components, these principles represent the building blocks for successful public engagement processes. In that sense, public meetings such as the one highlighted in this special issue, ought to make considered efforts to embody:

1. Careful Planning and Preparation
2. Inclusion and Demographic Diversity
3. Collaboration and Shared Purpose
4. Openness and Learning
5. Transparency and Trust
6. Impact and Action
7. Sustained Engagement and Participatory Culture

Overall, the in-depth examinations of communication practices provided by the articles included in this special issue highlight some of the substantial challenges faced by participants in the public meeting. In a way, the meeting could be viewed as a prototypical failure in public engagement because it failed to accomplish the most basic tenets of public participation. That is, one could argue, the meeting did not seem to embody or adequately demonstrate any of the principles listed above. Although the NODP presenters may have had good intentions and thought they were making efforts to be inclusive, seek community input, and contribute to the economic development of the North Omaha community, the communication occurring during the



meeting itself manifested significant contentions about whether or not these principles were evident.

Part of the problem came from the ways in which both the meeting structure and communicative acts that occurred during the meeting set up the consultants and Chamber of Commerce members as outsiders who could not be trusted. The meeting structure and communicative behaviors also seemed to devalue local community members' lived experiences and failed to engage members of the community in collaborative action they believed had the potential to better their community. Based on the analysis of the articles in the special issue, and our own viewing of the public meeting, we offer four suggestions to public participation practitioners who wish to learn from the events of this meeting.

### **Understand and Be Responsive to Community Values**

Our first suggestion is for organizers of public meetings to start with a clear understanding of the values of community members. One of the keys for public involvement is making sure the public has input on the agenda. It's a basic feature of the democratic process—public control of the agenda (see Dahl, 1989, especially chapter 8)—and a reasonable expectation for citizens asked to provide “input.” In this meeting, the substantive concern raised by citizens in North Omaha was the legacy of racial discrimination in business ownership, business loans and financing, employment, and the like.

As a practical matter, we find it remarkable that this was not foregrounded as a topic for discussion by the NODP presenters. Even a cursory bit of research on the likely audience for that meeting would have shown this was a serious concern for North Omaha residents. Once it came up, the game was already lost, as it was apparent to the audience that they had to introduce it into the agenda. Unfortunately, the presenters compounded their error of omission with one of commission: Much of their response was to acknowledge the topic but put it safely in a box, such as in “To the extent it's a deterrent on economic growth, I'd say certainly.” That response was, substantively, a fair point, but using the term “economic growth” tries to defang the racism issue, which is not appropriate when an audience member is trying to push it forward into the agenda. Similarly, saying flatly, “It has to be addressed” rings hollow; it gives no indication of forethought about this issue, let alone any concrete ideas of what “address” might mean. The

third reply is even weaker, saying the NODP will “probably have an answer” because race “overlays” other economic issues.

In all of these comments, it seems to us that the NODP could have done a better job of understanding and valuing local community members’ perspectives. We do not suggest the members of the NODP are not knowledgeable of these issues. Many of them likely are given their time in and relationships with the North Omaha community. Rather, we suggest community members’ lived experiences of racism, violent crime, and the lack of opportunity for the youth should be the impetus for discussion rather than disregarded as a problem of perception. As Kelshaw and Gastil (2007) remind us, perception is not only important, it shapes what happens during the meeting and beyond. Finally, we encourage public meeting organizers to take seriously the importance of place. In North Omaha, the physical boundaries of the neighborhood were important markers of community membership, and this fact shaped much of the discourse during the NODP public meeting. Public meetings ought to begin with a clear understanding of what counts as the community to the members of the community itself. This understanding involves a sense of the community members’ values and experiences and the ways in which physical location defines the community.

### **Begin with Community Involvement**

Our second suggestion for public meeting conveners is closely tied to the first. Not only should the conveners of public meetings make efforts to *understand* the community, but also they are advised to *seek out community involvement and collaboration* from the very beginning. Partnering with community members early in the planning process can help meeting conveners anticipate issues that are important to community members (such as the issue of racism described above) and can also build trust and legitimate the participatory process.

In the NODP public meeting, the presenters seemed proud of the fact that they would be doing a survey of people in North Omaha to get input from the community after the meeting. We view this as an error in two ways. First, it can be seen as devaluing the perspectives of the community members who attended the meeting. If you want to put off the few people who bothered to attend a public meeting, nothing works better than assuring them that to get the opinions of a representative cross-section of their community, a survey will be conducted. In other words, it is easy for audience members to feel devalued if they get the sense that meeting

leaders believe the haphazard opinions of those assembled can be safely discounted. The message is: Save your breath. We'll get the real input from the survey, which, of course, will ask only the questions we want answered.

The second reason we see the conviction about the survey as a mistake is that this method may be at odds with the values of the community. For example, the language used by the NODP presenters at this phase in the meeting was very technical and focused on describing the survey as “statistically valid” and based on a random sample. The survey would also be done by phone. One audience member replied, she'd be expecting to receive by mail a printed questionnaire that she can read and study and “take the time to fill out...” She complains that a “telemarketer won't know anything about neighborhood matters.” She adds, “If you really want to get the input of residents who live in this area,” the NODP should “be a little more sophisticated” in their survey design.

Again with the technical language, the presenter tries to distance himself from the audience member. But the audience member demands a meaningful role in the form of a pen-and-paper survey—if not for herself, then for those other households that get randomly selected. We are sympathetic with her concern, but would take it a step farther. The Deliberative Poll (Fishkin & Farrar, 2005) was developed to allow people to complete surveys after having a couple days to work through issues. We think this citizen would be very receptive to that innovation, as she already can appreciate the greater time for reflection afforded by even just a paper versus telephone survey.<sup>1</sup>

A final dig at the phone survey comes in the context of concerns about how racism, perhaps unconsciously, shapes the NODP presenters' plan. During the discussion of the phone survey an audience member referred to its cost of \$350,000 and asked, “Is there a minority firm that is getting that money? We don't have a problem with you, it's the system...The system is always gonna take care of the system...That's where the skepticism is coming.”

Although the speaker distinguishes the NODP from “the system,” the point is clear that the presenters are, nonetheless, a spoke in the system's wheel. As the audience member points out, it is ironic that the topic of the meeting is economic development in the North Omaha neighborhood, yet the firm being paid to do a survey is located far outside of the local community. By this point in the meeting, the phone survey has become a target, and it seems as

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<sup>1</sup> See also the Center for Deliberative Democracy at <http://cdd.stanford.edu>.

though the NODP did not think carefully about their audience. If they had collaborated with the local community earlier in the public participation process it seems likely that these issues of disconnection with the community values could have been avoided.

### **Avoid Meeting Formats That (Appear to) Privilege One-way Communication**

Public officials have a long history of holding meetings after having already made up their minds on policy. These efforts at public outreach come once policymakers have a clear enough idea what they want to do and have decided it is time to sell it. Or at least comply with a vague cultural expectation of holding a “public meeting” on the policy before moving forward.

Worse still are meetings held early in a policymaking process with the idea that the public can provide input, only to have that input systematically ignored or (less often) openly dismissed. There are many reasons for this sad history of relations between citizens and public officials, but one is simply elected officials believe citizens put them in office to make decisions on their behalf. The public input is more a nice gesture than a part of a real policy process.

In this case, there appears to be truth to the NODP presenters’ claim that they haven’t yet written a development plan. Yet, it would be disingenuous to suggest there is not a plan of some sort. Yet, as the essays in this special issue point out, armed with only the promise of many more public meetings, the NODP presenters struggled to confront the public’s skepticism about genuine involvement “We’re here to hear from you” is a very weak comment, and it fails to acknowledge the public’s doubts.

What citizens want and need are concrete tasks in a clearly laid-out timeline that shows decision points where they can shape the plan. The NODP presenters needed to be better prepared for this concern; they could have specified the project’s general parameters—those that attracted them to the project—and been clear about what parts of the proposal are yet to be shaped. After all, the NODP presenters have only gotten together because there *is* a plan of some kind; otherwise, what is it they’ve organized around (and raised money for already)? The more innovative, deliberative public meeting methods really engage citizens in questions of substance and give them meaningful roles in the policymaking process.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Another resource available is the Engagement Streams Framework developed by the National Coalition on Dialogue and Deliberation. to compare different methods of deliberation/dialogue is <http://www.thataway.org/exchange/resources.php?action=view&rid=2142>

The essays of this special issue demonstrate audience members in the NODP public meeting responded negatively to several aspects of the meeting that, in their perspective, framed it as a disingenuous form of public participation. One of these features was the fact that the meeting involved a lengthy PowerPoint presentation from NODP presenters. PowerPoint has begun to carry some cultural baggage, as a symbol of laziness (clip-art deployment), content-free presentation (bullet points signifying nothing), and distracting razzle-and-dazzle (excessive transitions and animations). More to the point, if one “has a PowerPoint” on the subject, one carries the association that one has *completed* something. In this context, in particular, it resonates with the public perception that the NODP have in their hands a more-or-less completed plan. Beginning with the PowerPoint may have been meant to set the stage, but instead, it served to confirm suspicions that the plan was already set.

Moreover, the differences in attire and structural separation between presenters and audience members created a scene that privileged experts over community members. Audience input was framed as questions, and at the beginning of the question period the NODP presenters appeared to be sorting through the question cards, which at least some audience members referred to as “screening” the questions.

All of these features gave the appearance of the meeting as an information session, rather than a conversation about possibilities. If public officials hope to host a public meeting where community members come together to discuss possibilities, then they would be well advised to avoid meeting formats that seem to privilege one-way communication and devalue public input. This seems obvious to public participation scholars and practitioners, but in the case of the NODP public meeting illustrates how public officials may rely on structural features that seem familiar and useful, but are actually at odds with their goals. The newer public meeting formats that foster deliberative discussion, such as those described by the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation, offer a much better way of engaging the community in productive public discussion.

## **Communication Matters**

Finally, the essays in this special issue make a strong argument that the words we say, the way we say them, and the nonverbal aspects of interaction are all important in shaping the process and outcome of public meetings. Public participation scholars ought to pursue more

research to closely examine the communicative nature of public meetings, and those who host and facilitate public meetings ought to pay close attention to the interaction during the meeting itself.

Conscientious leaders of public meetings should develop what Cockett refers to as “two brains” when they participate in the meeting. In other words, meeting leaders need to not only pay attention to the *content* of what is being communicated, but also the *process* by which the communication is taking place. This means watching for patterns in the interaction and addressing questions such as: How equitable are the speaking turns? Are interactions respectful, inclusive, and considerate? Whose voices are, and are not, being heard? What are pivotal moments that seem to shape the interaction? How are we (the leaders) experiencing this interaction and how is that different from the verbalized experiences of our audience? In short, we urge the leaders of public meetings to start to think, at least a little bit, like a Language and Social Interaction scholar. By developing some sensitivity to the nuances of interaction, public meeting leaders can act as facilitators who comment on the meeting processes and act in ways to shape the interactions to be more in line with the principles of public engagement.

We also offer some more concrete suggestions for public meeting leaders, based on our observations and analysis of the NODP public meeting. First, listen. Listen to community members’ stories and experiences, and try to understand their perspectives. Listen to their critiques and concerns about the meeting process and outcome. Listen for community members’ values and work to get a sense of what issues mean to those who live and experience them. Such an approach to listening is central to dialogic modes of public engagement (Chasin et al., 1996; Pearce & Pearce, 2000) and can help establish trust, foster collaboration, and legitimate public engagement processes.

Also, we urge public meeting leaders to recognize how their own language choices frame the purposes of the meeting and the relationships among the participants. In the NODP meeting we saw that communication processes tended to categorize participants into two distinct groups, and these groups were constructed as adversarial. Similarly, the metacommunication leaders use to describe what they are doing in the meeting can frame the purpose and goals of the process in ways that are consistent with, or divergent from, the aims of public participation. For instance, in a particular meeting, whether leaders describe their communication as “telling” or “discussing” can potentially make a difference in how much community members view the meeting as a one-

way event where decisions are already made or a collaborative conversation where community input matters.

Finally, disagreement is central to public participation and deliberation (Benhabib, 1996; Cohen, 1996; Delli Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004), and how leaders respond to disagreement is crucial. We urge public meeting leaders to expect, and be ready to productively deal with, disagreement, including disagreement on not only the content or topics of the meeting but also the procedures of the meeting crafted by the leaders. First, regarding disagreement on content or topics, the essays in this issue examined several examples of disagreement in the NODP public meeting, which were responded to differently by members of the NODP presentation team. For example, Plummer's essay describes how Dave Brown's response to the question of trust ("Is there anybody else standing in front of you saying they will lead a charge to improve North Omaha?") set up the NODP as "defenders" of a proposal rather than partners in a collaborative effort to improve the community. A defensive or adversarial response to disagreement not only damages trust, but can also devalue public input, discourage participation and discussion, and influence the outcome of the meeting.

In contrast, several essays in this issue examine the response by Dick Davis to the question of trust. As Witteborn and Sprain indicate, Davis' response to this situation seemed to be an effort to honor different perspectives, build collective identity and community, and clearly address the content of the disagreement. Such a response encourages productive conflict management and, we argue, engages the public in ways that are consistent with the principles of our field.

Second, challenges by the public about the meeting process should be treated as an opportunity, not a nuisance. Several essays in this issue point out moments in which audience members voiced concerns or criticism over the way the meeting was proceeding. Moreover, these essays demonstrate the audience's perception was these concerns and critiques were simply "dismissed" by the meeting leaders. Rather than disregarding such comments, meeting leaders have the opportunity to make them the explicit topic of discussion, even if only briefly. Doing so would require the leaders to know and be able to articulate why the meeting procedures are what they are. Leaders should also be prepared to discuss these procedures with the audience and act responsively if a better process is offered. Obviously, this will not always be an option but, in the case of the NODP, many more meetings were being planned. In sum, in a world in which

participation in public meetings and distrust go hand-in-hand, transparency and discussion about public meeting processes has great potential to build trust between officials and the public.

Trust, community, and participatory process are inherently discursive. Close attention to the language interaction of public meeting will not only contribute to the public participation field's conceptual maturation, but it also offers practical guidance for improving the practice of public meetings.



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