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Beyond Aggregation: "The Wisdom of Crowds" Meets Dialogue in the Case Study of Shaping America's Youth

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Abstract

The present interpretive case study examined how an interorganizational partnership facilitating five large-scale public dialogues on childhood obesity, held throughout the United States, carried out its commitment to engage nonexperts in solutions. Leaders of the Shaping America's Youth collaboration, believed the wisdom of crowds is facilitated through discussion. Accordingly this study has implications for deliberative practice as it provides a heuristic for eliciting the voice of nonexperts. In particular we describe empirically grounded dialogic principles that underlay a successful participation process: voice, diversity, transparency, preparedness, and neutrality. Additionally, the study documents perceived outcomes linking dialogic process and product by identifying changes in the rules and resources available to the public in light of the problem, including local and state policy level changes, and strengthened relationships and credibility with the media and funders. Finally, the case challenges theoretical assumptions about the wisdom of crowds as simply an aggregate of individually held knowledge.

Author Biography

Renee Guarriello Heath is a professor of communication studies interested in interorganizational partnerships, dialogue, and democratic practices in the workplace. She has published numerous articles on the subject and is a co-editor and author of two books pertaining to collaborative communication. Ninon Lewis is a project manager for the Institute for Healthcare Improvement. She facilitates and provides training on dialogic and collaborative practices across interorganizational partnerships. Brit Schneider and Elisa Majors work in the nonprofit sector and higher education, respectively.

Keywords

The Wisdom of Crowds, nonexperts, dialogue, public dialogue

Acknowledgements

Introduction

A handful of leaders across for-profit, nonprofit, and government sectors, including a nationally recognized medical doctor and nutrition expert, and directors from Nike, Inc., and the U.S. Surgeon General's office, coalesced in a collaborative partnership of decision-makers under the name Shaping America's Youth (SAY). Given their view that the so-called experts had failed to influence change, they agreed that the solutions to childhood obesity must be found in collaboration with ordinary citizens—"nonexperts." This assumption led to SAY's partnership with the nonprofit, public deliberation pioneer, America*Speaks*, whose influential 21ˢᵗ Century Town Meeting® model facilitated engaging citizens in solutions.[1] In line with the growing trend of large-scale deliberation meetings, these partners brought together citizens from a cross-section of community stakeholder groups in a series of public dialogues that would ultimately influence changes related to childhood obesity. The mission of SAY was "to assure that the voices of families and communities are integrated into local and national policy to improve the nutrition, physical activity, and health of children and youth" (SAY meeting minutes). The present study commenced when SAY was in its fifth year of organizing, which was devoted to engaging communities toward this mission through a series of town meetings. As scholars and practitioners, we were interested in the organizing question, how would SAY carry out its commitment to engage nonexperts in solutions? What we found was an instructive case study that a) provides a heuristic for eliciting the voices of nonexperts, b) documents perceived outcomes linking dialogic process and product, and c) challenges theoretical assumptions about the wisdom of crowds as simply an aggregate of individually held knowledge.

This paper proceeds with a theoretical understanding of the wisdom of crowds including two schools of thought—one absent of a deliberative communicative model and one inclusive of a communicative model of gleaning meaningful input from nonexperts. The communicative model we introduce is grounded in literature on dialogue, public dialogue, and deliberation. This literature provides the context for our findings. We argue that SAY chose to engage nonexperts in solutions with a meeting method grounded in dialogic principles. After describing the methods of the study, and the findings that explicate how nonexperts were engaged, we introduce several outcomes that participants perceived as a result of the meeting process. These outcomes suggest implications for communicative

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[1] America*Speaks,* considered a pioneer in public deliberation models, closed its doors after 19 years in January, 2014. Its town meeting model and founder, Carolyn Lukensmeyer, remain influential in the public deliberation and facilitation arena.

models of engaging nonexperts in solutions. They demonstrate the *how* and *why* leaders of social change may choose to communicatively engage nonexperts.

The Wisdom of Crowds

SAY cofounder Dr. David McCarron was admittedly influenced by the popular book, *The Wisdom of Crowds* (Suroweicki, 2005). He frequently used this phrase, constituting a philosophical commitment to including the ideas and thoughts of ordinary citizens in policy advising on childhood obesity. This school of thought, promoted in the work of business columnist James Suroweicki and expounded on by philosopher Miriam Solomon (2006) in her theoretical critique against deliberation and group discussion, posits that nonexperts make better decisions than experts. We next explore two approaches to garnering the wisdom of crowds.

The Aggregate Model of the Wisdom of Crowds

The crux of Suroweicki's (2005) theory was not based on the idea that the discussion and deliberation of nonexperts would lead to better decisions, but that the calculated aggregate of individual decisions would surpass the quality of decisions/solutions made by experts. He provides a number of empirical examples supporting his claim examining nondeliberative forums such as the stock market. Suroweicki's (2005) conclusions are based on three conditions for a "crowd to make a good judgment: independence, diversity, and decentralization" (Solomon 2006, p. 35). First, independence means that a person makes a decision outside of discussion or knowledge of others' opinions. Diversity means that individuals have different knowledge and perspectives in relation to the problem. And decentralization refers to the aggregation process, which does not weigh expert votes more heavily than those of other participants. Accordingly, the Suroweicki/Solomon vision of nonexperts guiding decision-making leaves no room for a deliberative or discussion-based model of communication. Indeed, Solomon likens such a process to groupthink, equating the communicative model to the worst of group decision-making, quoting Suroweicki as saying, "too much communication paradoxically, can actually make the group as a whole less intelligent" (Solomon, 2006, p. 32). This understanding of the wisdom of crowds inherent in nonexperts, perhaps best depicted in polling, is absent, and may be better described as antitheoretical of participant communication.

A Communicative Model of the Wisdom of Crowds

McCarron and his SAY partners' version of the wisdom of crowds departed from this anticommunicative model, claiming instead, "If you get enough (…) non-

expert people, you give them enough information and they can talk about it and have some discussions (…) collectively they'll get incredibly close [to solving the problem]." A communication model of the wisdom of crowds may be best exemplified in contemporary practices of public dialogue and deliberation, where expert participation is frequently limited and qualified. Studies in deliberation have established that experts present three challenges. Their presence 1) reifies an information-deficit model of communication, (suggesting if only scientists supply the right information, the public will make the best decisions); 2) reproduces a reliance on experts to tell the public what to do; and 3) and "authority" can be seen as undermining liberal democratic values (Sprain, Carcasson, & Merola, 2014). As a result, many participatory (communication) models seek ways to minimize expert influence on values discussions, while utilizing experts to help clarify information, often in an "on tap" model, where they do not participate in decision-making conversations but may be called upon by participants to clarify scientific information (Sprain, et al., 2014). Such a model centralizes the voices of nonexperts. In contrast to aggregate models of the wisdom of crowds, the communicative model is dialogic—communication is generative. Barge (2017) explains communication in this context:

> (…) generative conversations are ones that enhance our ability to play off each other's responses in ways that foster learning, creativity, and innovation. Such conversations are marked by managing the tension between: (1) supporting what other people are saying, recognizing the value and worth of people's identity, ideas, and interests, and (2) challenging what they say by introducing different perspectives, interests, and viewpoints into the conversation. (p. 35).

The following section unpacks elements most frequently attributed to dialogue and public deliberation as we continue to develop a communication model of the wisdom of crowds.

Dialogue as communication. Dialogue is the microcommunication practice enacted in public dialogue and is more than just the back and forth exchange of conversations. Four themes present in extant dialogic studies develop a nuanced understanding: (a) dialogue as creation; (b) dialogue as voices in tension; (c) dialogue as the relation of self and other; and (d) dialogue as reclaiming conflict (Anderson, Baxter, & Cissna, 2004a). These themes are evident in Barge's definition of generative conversations. First, dialogue as creation implies it can be generative and transformative of new ways of understanding or knowing (Anderson et al., 2004a; Cissna & Anderson, 1994). Second, dialogue as a conversation of voices in tension notes the ideological difference of perspectives

that communicators bring to the conversation (Anderson et al., 2004a). An underlying theme of voices in tension illuminates the presence of difference or diversity in conversation (Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997). Diversity is connected to the subject matter; interactants experience differences in relation to a particular subject (Deetz, 1992). Third, dialogue as a relation of self-and-other emphasizes understanding the other and oneself in relation to the other's perspective. This reflexivity includes preparation needed on behalf of participants to engage in dialogic conversation (Chasin et al., 1996; Ellinor & Gerard, 1998; McNamee & Shotter, 2004). Finally, Anderson et al. (2004a) emphasize that, "dialogic communication theory is an effort to reclaim conflict" (p. 262). Spano (2001) also argued that, "conflict and disagreement, as well as collaboration and consensus are essential parts of a rich dialogue" (p. 190). Dialogic studies often emphasize the respectful communication environment that facilitates constructive disagreement as well as the transparency needed to acknowledge differences (Deetz & Simpson, 2004; Habermas, 1979). Many studies are now tending to what creates the conditions for dialogue in the public setting.

Public dialogue and deliberation. Heidlebaugh (2008) argued, "by late 20th century, much thinking about public deliberation had come to characterize it as a dialogic process (27, see also Burkhalter, Gastil, & Krenshaw, 2002). Scholarship is both theorizing and discovering new models of public engagement as public dialogue (Barge, 2006; Black & Wiederhold, 2014; Escobar, 2009; Sprain et al., 2014). These models exist with various names such as Conversation Cafés, Consensus Conferences, and Appreciative Inquiry (for review, see National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation, 2010) and are applied in various social and political contexts, such as public planning (Forester, 1993) and cultural diversity initiatives (Spano, 2001; see Anderson, Cissna, & Clune, 2003; Barge, 2006, for academic reviews). Public dialogue bridges dialogue with deliberation; "public dialogue can, and ultimately should, produce concrete decisions that lead to specific forms of action" (Spano, 2001, p. 144). However, as Black and Wiederhold (2014) argued, "unlike deliberation, which is generally understood to include some aspect of decision-making, dialogue focuses more on building understanding" (p. 287). In public dialogue, deliberation plays a role in leading to decisions made jointly between citizens and policy makers. Deliberation is "a communicative process in which participants weigh the advantages and disadvantages of a given issue or policy and make choices about the kind of actions that should be taken" (Spano, 2001, p. 32). Although dialogue in its purest form is not goal-oriented, Burkhalter et al. (2002) identified three aims of dialogue in public deliberation processes: (1) to suspend one's own belief and continue listening; (2) to foster empathy for the other with whom you engage; and (3) to create a shared language or mode of reasoning regarding the subject.

Heidlebaugh (2008) argued studies are needed to better understand dialogic processes. Our study adds to this conversation by articulating *how dialogic principles played a role in the design of engaging nonexperts* on issues of childhood obesity.

Another area warranting further attention is the link between dialogic processes and outcomes. "New ways should be explored for making better use of the tension between product and process [of dialogue]" (Heidlebaugh, 2008, p. 29). Deliberation scholars such as James Fishkin (1995) and John Gastil and colleagues (1993, 2000a, 2000b; Gastil, Black, Deess, & Leighter, 2008; Reedy, Gastil, & Moy, 2016) have contributed to our understanding of individual and group outcomes of public deliberation noting changes in individual participant civic attitudes, trust in deliberative models such as the jury system, and shifts in ideological commitments, to name a few. In light of Solomon's critique of communicative models, and SAY members' commitment to eliciting nonexpert contributions through discussion-based processes, our data gave us the opportunity to add specifically to this research as we considered *what are the implications of a communication-based process in eliciting the wisdom of crowds?*

Methods

Yin (2014) argued case studies are the perfect methodology for "how" and "why" questions and situations where the investigators have little control over the events. With a rich quantitative history of public deliberations studies, and the shift toward dialogic explanations, this case study adds to public dialogue literature with thick description of dialogue's role in eliciting nonexpert participation, and the implications of that process as perceived by its participants. Given that our research team was composed of an academic researcher (first author) interested in interorganizational partnerships, a member of the SAY organization (an interorganizational collaborative partnership) and graduate student (second author), an undergraduate researcher and SAY employee (third author), and graduate student research assistant (fourth author), we sought first to gather data and later employ an inductive approach as we learned more about the organization. As such our study is interpretive of data that emerged, as well as focused as we employed theoretical categories to make sense of, and narrow our findings (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Our research questions were arrived at iteratively, forming as patterns in the data began to form, and reciprocally as we placed our findings in the context of larger literatures. After more than two years of study, we focused our analysis on the public meetings to which SAY were so committed. That said, we make sense of the data drawing on our own theoretical

assumptions and backgrounds related to dialogue and democratic processes (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000; Habermas, 1979). Drawing on these frameworks no doubt influenced how we understand the data (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000).

The Site

After soliciting bids SAY partnered with America*Speaks* (A*S*), a non-profit organization facilitating meetings based upon a deliberate methodology that included diverse participation, neutral material, table facilitation, participation technology, immediate reporting, and links to decision-makers (Lukensmeyer & Brigham, 2005, pp. 52-53). Meetings were held in four major cities: Memphis, Dallas, Chicago, and Philadelphia, and a statewide meeting took place in Iowa. Participant numbers ranged from 333 (Iowa) to 880 persons (Memphis). Two experienced A*S* facilitators, referred to as lead facilitators, emceed the eight-hour meetings. Ten participants were seated randomly at each round table with a trained facilitator to ensure that all individuals were engaged. Every table was also equipped with a computer that allowed another participant at the table to record the thoughts and ideas of the table participants. In addition, each participant was provided with a keypad polling-device. The lead facilitators provided the questions for the tables to discuss, such as, "What actions can families take to improve the nutrition of children ages 6-11?" Comments collected at each table were sent electronically for real-time analysis to a "theme team," a group of local individuals who were selected for their backgrounds related to the subject of childhood obesity or due to their skills in analytical research. The team reviewed the individual comments from each of the tables, coded each comment, and then reported the common ideas or themes back to the participants via jumbo video screens. After considering the themes that had been identified, participants individually voted on their keypads for the theme they thought was most important. Polling results were reported instantly to the entire group on the screens.

Participants

Participants included national stakeholders, local organizers, and individual meeting participants. At the *national stakeholder level,* we observed the organizing meetings of the four SAY founders and a multiday training session conducted by staff of their meeting partner, A*S*. Throughout the town meeting phase of the SAY partnership, many interested parties and partners formed coalitions at the local level to organize the community-wide meetings. We call this level of engagement local collaboration and the partners involved in this effort *local organizers.* The local coalitions served as host entities for the town

meetings.[2] Data included in our study came from a follow-up all-day meeting, and interviews held with those involved with the local collaboration and charged with conducting a town meeting in their city. Finally, data at the *meeting participant level* included aggregated votes from individuals who participated in the town meeting process, and field notes that resulted from conversations that took place at the table that Renée facilitated.

Data Collection

Following the guidelines of our institutional review board, data were gathered chiefly via observation and interviews. Renée participated in the final SAY town meeting as a table facilitator in Iowa. Niñon began gathering information as a participant observer and program director for SAY; she was present for the organization and execution of all five meetings and left the SAY organization before the study ended. Renée also observed the ongoing national stakeholder meetings during the year SAY conducted the 21st Century Meetings® and for two years after. Observations were either copiously recorded in notes or audio-taped and later transcribed. In addition, Renée attended a three-day training with A*S* facilitators as a participant observer in the Community Forum Training, designed to teach the 21st Century Town Meeting® model to community leaders who might be able to replicate the forum on a smaller scale.

We conducted formal sit-down interviews with the four national founding stakeholders of SAY and the five facilitators of the A*S* Community Forum Training, lasting approximately one hour each, with the exception of Dr. McCarron, who was interviewed for several hours on two occasions. Niñon conducted an extensive follow-up debrief with 80 local organizers from all five meetings, which took place in an all-day retreat two months after the last Town Meeting (Philadelphia Organizers' Meeting). Our research team conducted six additional follow-up phone interviews of key informants at the local organizer level, averaging 20-30 minutes, to determine outcomes three years after the meetings commenced. Contributing to the validity of our findings, Steve Brigham, A*S*, chief operating officer at the time of the study, read and commented on drafts of our findings. Data from follow-up interviews with local organizers conducted by staff employed by A*S* were also included with participant permission. A secondary source of data came from the textual documents

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[2] Local organizing coalitions were the Healthy Memphis Common Table, the Dallas Area Coalition for the Prevention of Childhood Obesity, the Childhood Origins of Disease of Adulthood (CODA) in Philadelphia, the Consortium to Lower Obesity in Chicago Children (CLOCC), and Iowans Fit for Life. Participants were given pseudonyms in this study.

available through both the SAY projects and A*S*. Documents included in our analysis incorporate: the first survey produced by SAY; raw data collected by SAY from the town meetings; videos made available on the A*S* website; literature published on both SAY and A*S* websites; and the SAY report proposing a national action plan (Kessel & McCarron, 2010; *Shaping America's Youth*, 2004). In addition, we reviewed the SAY supplement in the *Journal of American Pediatrics Association* (McCarron et al., 2010) and agendas, minutes, and other handouts made available at SAY board meetings.

Analysis

Our research questions were honed in the iterative process of data analysis and further data collection given the more than 2,100 pages of data we gathered. As we recognized the importance of citizen voice to the SAY mission, we identified several dialogic themes in our analysis. Data were first analyzed using the NVivo 8 qualitative-data sorting program to identify significant and repetitious categories (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Primary data sets included in this analysis were transcribed texts of all the national level stakeholder interviews and meetings, transcribed texts from the follow-up meeting held in Philadelphia with local organizers, notes from follow-up interviews held with local organizers, and transcribed texts of the A*S* Community Forum Training and interviews with the A*S* staff. These texts offer perspectives from both the organizational stakeholders who funded, designed, and conducted the meetings, and the experience of those involved in local collaborations that organized the town meetings.

Several themes related to dialogue were visible, including diversity, transparency, and preparation, to name a few. In later stages of our analysis, meeting outcomes became an unexpected theme that fostered an iterative understanding of the processes we observed and led us to our second research question regarding the implications of a communicative model of engaging nonexperts in decision-making. We later collapsed the themes into three umbrella categories named voice, dialogic elements, and outcomes of meetings. These three categories were the lenses by which we organized the textual data such as that which came from the websites. Voice was literally referred to so frequently that it not only influenced our research direction but we initially left it as its own category. However, employing a constant-comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), we later collapsed voice into the category of dialogic principles as per our theoretical understanding of the concept.

Findings

Fostering Engagement through Dialogue

In answer to our guiding question regarding how SAY engaged the voice of nonexperts, we found the SAY/America*Speaks* method was authentically grounded in specific dialogic commitments to voice as mutuality and influence, and principles of diversity, transparency, preparedness, and neutrality. As a way of interpreting dialogue and its outcomes, we consider Anthony Gidden's (1984) "duality of structure" as an explanation of the way human interaction generates structures that in turn work to enable and constrain human interaction. Thus, interaction is both a process and product. We introduce the enabling feature of the processes featured in this case while keeping in mind their constraining attributes, which serve to prevent us from idealizing the characteristics of public dialogue.

Table 1
Principles of Public Dialogue

- Voice (influence)
- Diversity
- Transparency
- Preparedness
- Neutrality

Voice. Given the explicit mission of the SAY initiative, it is not surprising the theme of voice was the largest category in our data. The concept of voice has roots both in dialogic literatures (as a discursive process of reciprocity among actors, Deetz & Simpson, 2004) and public engagement literatures (as public influence, Senecah, 2004). Voice among communicators implies reciprocity and mutuality as each influences the way the other understands the subject matter. Although often the term "voice" was used literally by participants in the study, we also themed subcategories of voice, such as an emphasis on grassroots-initiated change, which indicated a granting of power to people who are not usually included in policy-setting on childhood obesity. After spending the first two years of their collaboration gathering initial data regarding the existing childhood obesity programs throughout the country, the stakeholders argued that the next logical step was to find out, with all of the expertise, knowledge, and programmatic efforts available to fight childhood obesity, why the problem was still so urgent. In an interview, cofounder Molly White, formerly of Nike Inc., explained, "There was a missing voice, it was the public voice. Let's go get it." Voice was a core principle of the engagement process, as the national

stakeholders believed strongly that expert opinions were not enough to influence the behavior of individuals. White said in an interview, "It became the voice journey. I mean if this issue's going to be resolved in the way that's actually going to drive any change, it's going to have to include these people." This conception is in line with Milam and Heath's (2014) definition of voice in community decision-making as "communication microprocesses and structures that constitute civic legitimacy by fostering access to, and participation in, influential discussions in collaborative decision-making situations" (p. 370). The articulated commitment to voice, though, also can be constraining as such public commitments foster expectations that participants will have influence in the process. Voice as a principle is enabling; voice as a promise without a mechanism for fostering influence may be perceived as superficial (Milam & Heath, 2014).

Diversity. Diversity was a repetitive subcategory; it was a primary element and goal of the town meetings. America*Speaks* identified diverse participants as a foundational building block of their model because "diverse participation gives decision-makers the confidence that the meeting outcome reflects the whole community's needs and views" (Lukensmeyer & Brigham, 2005, p. 52). Kim, an A*S* staff facilitator, explained in a training designed to teach the 21st Century Town Meeting® model to community leaders, "We're looking at *your* diversity." She said, "When you have people from the same senior center [for example] sitting at the same table, then when you get to that theme [referring to the theming process] you are only getting one voice" (Community Forum Training). Thus, SAY concentrated on gathering diverse *viewpoints* in the room, which is different than simplistic and static understandings of diversity as "social group membership" (Black, 2008, p. 97). Molly White reflected on the process, saying that, "The focus on the demographic around each table (…) facilitated interaction" (interview). Molly's comment emphasizes the essential role of diversity was communicative—to promote interaction.

In addition to recruiting relevant stakeholders regarding the subject matter of childhood obesity, such as parents, teens, teachers, and public health officials, the A*S* model of "targeted recruitment" is well-documented (Ryfe & Stalsburg, 2012). Organizers researched demographics in the targeted community, and outreach efforts were made in concert with community leaders and local organizers to closely match the demographic composition of the community. In other words, demographics such as race, socioeconomic status, and education looked different in Chicago than they did in Iowa. Local organizer Deborah reinforced the credibility that arose from diversity efforts. She said, "A real positive effect that we also got [was] such a cross section of representation from policy makers to a certain extent, to school board, the state, youth, etc."

(Philadelphia Organizers' Meeting). Deborah's comment reinforces that diversity was, in part, dependent on the subject matter (Deetz & Simpson, 2004). The most common recruitment methods included: direct outreach at community events, health fairs, conferences, or faith-based organizations; and telephone and e-mail outreach using available lists from local organizations involved in the effort. In Iowa and Chicago, special efforts were made to engage local policy makers in the meeting, ensuring influence. Outreach was supplemented by media such as television interviews, blog posts in local outlets, or announcements in local and regional magazines and newsletters, and paid media via radio advertisements, public radio announcements, and newspaper ads. Organizers monitored registration reports on a weekly, and at times daily, basis to track if demographic diversity targets were being met, refining recruitment tactics as needed. A summary published by SAY claimed,

> The demographics of the participants adequately reflected several of the known variables associated with excess weight in children. In general, the participants in each city were reasonably representative of the metropolitan area; for each case in which there was overrepresentation of a demographic group, it tended to favor factors associated with an increased risk for excess weight. Thus, the participants represented a good cross-section of that portion of the US population for whom solving this health crisis is particularly important. (McCarron et al., 2010, p. S79)[3]

The principle of diversity was both driven by representative politics (demographics) and the subject matter, childhood obesity. It is easy to understand how cost and human resources could prohibit diverse recruitment of nonexperts. It is also understandable that without both demographic and subject matter-specific diversity (such as the inclusion of teens in the discussion), the quality of the conversations at the tables would be altered and arguably less credible.

Transparency. The town meeting model used by SAY and designed by A*S* exemplified a transparent process. Two of the six building blocks of the 21st Century Town Meeting® identified by Lukensmeyer and Brigham (2005)—participation technology and immediate reporting—promoted transparency. In this sense, transparency is the mechanism whereby meeting participants acknowledge difference and build trust. Transparency makes visible the steps of policy setting and allows for public dialogue to happen at multiple levels—among table participants, between tables, and from meeting participants to decision

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[3] Tables reflecting full demographic data from each city can be found in McCarron, Richartz, Brigham, White, Klien, & Kessel (2010).

makers. The technology used by A*S*, which not only collected ideas and concerns from each table, but reported the table themes back to participants as soon as possible, enabled this transparency to take place.

America*Speaks* trainers emphasized the importance of using the words of participants whenever possible in the theming process in order for participants to recognize their contributions to the larger conversation. A*S* staff facilitator, Theo, explained the theme team is a place "where credibility can be lost" if adequate attention is not paid to capturing the concerns and ideas of the participants in the theming process (Community Forum Training). Deborah (local organizer) described the theming process, "To actually see people's responses reflected on screen and then immediately after the meeting provided that instant gratification of people knowing that their opinions were counted" (Philadelphia Organizers' Meeting). This opinion was echoed among local collaborators. Julia (local organizer, Iowa) claimed, "Almost instantaneous feedback made the meeting unique and valuable. People felt they walked out of there with a good sense of the feeling of the group, and they had an opportunity to be heard as individuals" (Philadelphia Organizers' Meeting).

The A*S* theming-process was transparent in other ways. Although the facilitator encouraged a loose consensus on ideas that are recorded into the word processer and sent to the theme team, contrary opinions or ideas that did not reflect the majority view at the table were also recorded as "minority reports." At the end of the town meeting, all participants received a hard copy report of the day's activities, including a "high-level summary of the themes and the polling data" (Steve Brigham, America*Speaks*). A list of *every* idea that was recorded in the system and sent to the theme team was sent to the client (in this case, SAY) one week after the meeting. If the idea was not reflected on the theme team reports that were voted on, it was indeed listed in its original wording in the final report. Thus, participants and decision-makers could decide for themselves whether the theme team captured the essence of the discussion at the tables that day. Though transparency within the meetings and among participants was a valued principle, Christensen and Cheney (2015) complicate understandings of transparency by reminding us that transparency can never be fully achieved and can be fetishized, promoting unintended consequences such as greater efforts to conceal information knowing it will be made public. Transparency was therefore encouraged at the meeting organizational level, but we cannot fully understand how transparent the conversations taking place among meeting participants were. We must also consider that some participants could have utilized the transparency in the processes, such as their words being projected on the jumbo screens to influence or advocate in strategic ways that constrained participation.

Preparedness. The dialogic principle of preparedness was visible in several ways, including investment, information, and facilitation. This differs from the treatment of preparedness in dialogue studies, which emphasizes individual reflexivity. First, SAY national stakeholders invested extraordinary time and resources to raise funds to conduct the town meetings. The act of contracting the A*S* organization, an experienced facilitator of public meetings, demonstrated careful preparation at the national stakeholder level. The cost of each meeting ranged from $400,000 to $750,000. (Part of those costs included calculated outreach efforts to increase diversity). Second, one of the tenets of the SAY meetings was to create informed participation (McCarron et al., 2010), which included the production of a custom Participant Guide. These guides, usually 30-40 pages in length, were used during the meeting day to inform participants of current medical research or facts regarding their own community. Guides were also mailed to early registrants. Although the guide required extensive resources and months of preparation, it contributed to helping participants maintain equality in the conversation, at least allowing participants to begin the dialogue from a similar knowledge base. Thus, the 15-year-old student and the grandmother raising her grandkids were not at a complete disadvantage discussing how to solve obesity problems with teachers and nurses. Additionally, informed participation was encouraged through volunteer "experts" who roamed the room "on tap" (Sprain et al., 2014) on meeting day standing by to answer any technical questions related to childhood obesity but were not allowed to participate in the discussions. This practice also prepared participants to engage in a conversation they may or may not have known much about.

Finally, A*S* invested much time and energy into training and maintaining a force of volunteer facilitators. Renée, a scholar and teacher of group facilitation, participated in several hours of A*S* training prior to acting as a table facilitator for the Iowa SAY meeting. During the training, facilitators discussed ways to draw out quiet participants, subdue aggressive participants, and utilize the many resources available in the room to facilitate discussion. Daniel (A*S,* staff facilitator) explained, "What makes this process transformative at the individual level is the conversation they have at the table with their diverse backgrounds. It's the table facilitator that creates that environment" (Community Forum Training). In the case of SAY, extensive preparation went into creating an environment appropriate for dialogue with special emphasis on leveling the conversational playing field by giving participants the vocabulary, factual information, and cooperative situation they needed to reciprocally engage with one another. That preparation can also be viewed as constraining given the cost and time

commitments needed to prepare participants for complicated conversations in public dialogue settings.

Neutrality. Neutrality appears as an important element in the facilitation of public dialogue (Spano, 2001) and is one of the building blocks of the A*S* model (Lukensmeyer & Brigham, 2005). It was a theme in our study and works in public dialogue to facilitate other elements of dialogue theory, such as the surfacing of conflict, maintaining a respectful environment while doing so, and ensuring reciprocity among interactants (Heidlebaugh, 2008). In the public dialogue model, this responsibility is embedded in the design and facilitation of the process. SAY cofounder David McCarron explained,

> This is not a focus group. This is more than a focus group. And once you get a discussion going and you get nine or ten opinions around the table, there's going to be disagreement, conflict. If you stay calm, you're going to have to listen to other ideas, and that dialogue is very important.

America*Speaks* staff facilitator Daniel said, "Facilitators need to bring people out who are reluctant to talk. Keep things on task—multitask. They need to listen and not direct the conversation, stay neutral and not share their own opinions on the topic" (Community Forum Training). Daniel's colleague Mattice reinforced the emphasis on neutrality, claiming A*S* prioritizes publishing neutral information in the Participant Guide and recruiting neutral issue experts in the room on meeting day as well as neutral volunteer facilitators and members of the theme team (Community Forum Training). The hope is that neutral facilitation will encourage constructive conflict. The focus on neutrality deliberately created an environment in which dissenting positions would be surfaced and dissenters would be comfortable expressing their thoughts.

Though organizers and facilitators commonly voiced commitments to neutrality, we want to be careful not to uncritically glorify neutrality in the public dialogue processes. Parsa (2016) reminds us that facilitators are not neutral. They "make an active commitment to listen, to engage, to honor each person and perspective (…) this being multi-partial – not impartial" (para. 4). Dillard's (2013) study of facilitating strategies suggests that less involved and more neutral facilitation can actually negatively affect deliberative outcomes. Involved facilitators are more likely to promote deliberative functioning than forums with less facilitator involvement, suggesting neutrality can also constrain decision quality (p. 232). The A*S* model required even the most experienced facilitators to attend training prior to the public dialogues. This training reinforced the commitment to limit what Spada and Vreeland (2013) called moderator effects on the discussion.

Though training at the organizational level reinforced this value, what counts as neutral facilitation warrants further examination of microprocesses that were not captured in this study.

Meeting Results

Regarding our second focus concerning the implications of a communication-based process in eliciting the wisdom of crowds, we found specific perceived outcomes of the meeting process held by participants. These data suggest the benefits a communication/dialogic approach to eliciting the wisdom of crowds may have over an aggregate approach to decision-making. We return to Giddens's (1984) structuration theory to understand the potential of these outcomes, where structure manifests in rules and resources. A rule may be a principle or routine that guides behavior and action, and a resource is anything used in action (Poole & McPhee, 2005). Structures such as social and political policies that influence individual behaviors regarding childhood obesity include, for example, the banning of candy and soda from schools, as in the case of San Francisco (Delgado, 2003) or changing rules, such as updating the national school nutrition standards as attempted by the Child Nutrition Promotion and School Lunch Protection Act of 2009 (H.R. 1324). We identify structures as the product of a dialogic process that, in turn, affect action and interaction beyond the forum.

We do not attempt to determine a causal relationship; however, these perceived outcomes tell us something about the engagement process. We have labeled them transformation. The idea of individual transformation is often at the heart of dialogue (Cissna & Anderson, 1994; Ellinor & Gerard, 1998; McNamee & Shotter, 2004). But in public dialogue, what counts as transformation? Heidlebaugh (2008) offers some insight, arguing, "the *ultimate* desired outcome of the interaction is not the change in the relationships among the interactants or their perceptions of one another (…) but change in the way the issue is being perceived and handled in public" (p. 35). Community decision-making efforts have been evaluated elsewhere by considering three types of results of participatory processes: 1) changes produced in *social capital* (trust and reciprocity among participants),[4] 2) *outputs*—intermediary mechanisms between process and outcome such as plans, agreements, reports, and standards, and 3) *outcomes,* such as the long-term changes regarding quality of the issue (Morris, Gibson, Leavitt, & Jones, 2013). We identified elements of transformation happening at individual and public levels, primarily as social capital and output

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[4] Social capital differs from Heidlebaugh's conception of relationship quality, as it is not just viewed as something belonging to individual participants, but as necessary for community mobilization (Morris et al., 2013).

changes. Outcomes regarding changes in childhood obesity, which take longer to measure (Morris, et al., 2013), were beyond the scope of this study.

Individual transformation. Examination of the votes recorded at each of the meetings suggests that the town meetings had transformative qualities. In SAY's own raw data sets, participants were asked, "Have your opinions changed since you walked into this room?" Most participants answered yes to this question (Dallas 65.9%; Memphis 38%; Chicago 62.26%; Philadelphia 57.28%; and Iowa 50.71%). In every meeting except Memphis, more participants than not experienced a change in their opinions based on their experience that day. And even in Memphis, more than one-third of the participants reported changing their minds and/or learning something about the topic. Because these meetings were purposively dialogic and did not advocate a specific set of predetermined solutions, the change in perspectives might be attributed to the quality of conversation at the tables. For example, in an interaction among participants at the table facilitated by Renée at the Iowa meeting, one participant adamantly expressed his view that physical education (P.E.) should be offered every day to every grade, quickly gaining the consensus of the other table participants. The exception was a P.E. teacher participating in this group who logically explained, "at my school, in order for us to run classes every day, for every class, we will need to hire two more teachers and will need access to another gym. There just simply isn't the space or staff available to accommodate such a schedule." She went on to discuss equipment needs, storage needs, and how many students could safely participate in a facility at one time. What appeared to be a simple solution was complexified, and knowledge was expanded with the input of the local teacher. Other participants conceded that it would take greater resources and buy-in than originally thought to expand physical education programs. An important integration of knowledge was lent to the discussion, expanding how others might think of it.

Public transformation. We also considered transformations taking place in the public context that participants attributed to the SAY meetings. Meeting results included outputs that influenced the rules (policies) at local and state levels, and resources manifesting as social capital through collaboration, enriched media partnerships, funding, and credibility.

Table 2
Dialogic Transformation at the Public Level

- Rules
    - Policy changes at local and state levels
- Resources
    - Increased collaboration
    - Enriched media partnerships
    - Funding
    - Perceived credibility

Engagement transformed rules. In the case of SAY, citizen input through the process of engagement was either indirectly or directly credited with having affected a change in the rules, demonstrating that the voices of the crowds were not just heard but incorporated into policy setting. For example, in Dallas, local organizers held a follow-up meeting two months after the SAY town meeting that boasted an attendance of 170 people on a weekday. The follow-up meeting coalesced five working groups that developed more detailed recommendations and priorities, including 26 projects for their city. Iowan organizers walked away from the SAY town meeting with specific policy recommendations from the process, including incorporating dieticians in education areas, seeking better third-party payer status for obesity and obesity-related medical needs, and facilitating easier healthcare reimbursement. In addition, Iowa organizers drafted a bill toward accomplishing the top policy priority that was discussed at the SAY meeting—an informed commitment to daily quality P.E. in schools. The Healthy Kids Act Senate Bill 2425 was passed the following year**.** Denis claimed this policy platform in Iowa "emerged at the SAY meeting" (local organizer, interview).

Denise (local organizer, Memphis) also believed the SAY town meeting had an indirect but influential impact on "the entire school system." City schools revamped their curriculum for children pre-kindergarten through 12th grade. The state legislature committed $15 million dollars to a "longstanding but historically limited Coordinated School Health Initiative" (interview). These new rules required schools to focus on health and fitness in their curricula. Denise also claimed that the increased awareness that resulted from the SAY town meeting led to changes in prohibiting vending machines from selling junk food in the schools throughout the state. Denise said, "It wasn't just SAY, but I think SAY helped energize what was going on in Tennessee" (interview). These initiatives alter current rules for how things work within systems.

Engagement fostered resources. We also identified changes in resources that would be available to individuals as they navigate managing weight, exercise, and nutrition as a result of the SAY meetings. Findings in this section establish the SAY town meetings were catalysts to an array of community-level resources including greater interorganizational collaboration, stronger media partnerships, funding for programs, and increased credibility for existing organizations and programs. All of these resources can be viewed as social capital products that can be leveraged toward solutions (Morris et al., 2013).

One of the largest categories we found to be influenced by the SAY town meetings was the increase in collaboration among key stakeholders who are in a position to help families solve the problem. For example, Memphis schools had started Healthy Choices Week but, according to local collaborators, "it had not really gotten off the ground; [it] was really energized by the SAY meeting" (Denise, local organizer). Julia in Iowa said the SAY meeting helped to pull together various entities working on initiatives: "[We] were working together before, but more so now. It helped advance the partnership effort another step and provided validation for priorities the groups have been working on." In particular, Julia claimed that the Department of Education and the Department of Health have "developed stronger communication channels, because we had more in-depth conversations than we had previously" (local organizer, interview).

Another category of resources that emerged subsequent to the SAY town meetings was the relationship local organizers had with the media, a potentially powerful catalyst to solving social problems through the dissemination of information. Denise (local organizer, Memphis) claimed the local newspaper outlet was a community partner that "really got on board after the SAY meeting" (interview). In Philadelphia, a relationship was forged with the PBS affiliate that funded the follow-up meeting that included 80 key organizers at the local collaboration level from the five participating cities. The meeting, which took place in Philadelphia two months after the last of the five national town meetings (Iowa), allowed organizers from local and national levels to discuss outcomes and next steps.

Stakeholders at the local collaboration level reported greater access to funds or potential for greater access to funds. For example, Marilyn (Dallas) explained how the town meeting served as leverage for funding through the grant-proposal process: "We always mention the town meeting in our proposals, how many people were involved, how many different organizations were involved" (interview). Marilyn reported securing funds from United Way for an afterschool initiative. Chicago organizers believed that they were successful in securing

funding at the state level in some part due to the momentum gained at the SAY meeting (interview).

Finally, SAY meetings boosted the credibility of those already working on health and nutrition issues for children in their communities. Thus, local organizers gained credibility as a resource they can further use to leverage programs, funding, and legislative changes. For example, local organizers in Dallas said, "It has given the coalition some credibility, in this case gaining legislative attention" (interview). Joe in Chicago claimed, "We got an endorsement from the public at-large of the direction that the task force was headed in" (interview). And Julia (Iowa) said, [The SAY town meeting] provided validation for the priorities that groups have been working on" (interview). Denis (Iowa) hailed the process of gathering a great number of people in a short time, giving them voice, and validating their input with video screens. Although SAY did not create new initiatives, he claimed the results from theses meetings have "fallen in line with other statewide initiatives to lend additional credibility and energy to those initiatives" (interview). Joe and Jennifer, organizers from the Chicago town meeting, credited the town meeting as an opportunity to let people know about their task force and gain broad-based community support for their initiatives (joint interview).

Implications for Deliberative Practice and Theory

What does this case teach us about harnessing the wisdom of crowds from nonexperts? We describe an instructive exemplar that advances theory and practice regarding public dialogue by providing a heuristic for eliciting the voices of nonexperts. In particular, we identified empirically grounded principles that underlay a successful participation process: voice, diversity, transparency, preparedness, and neutrality. Though prescriptive methodologies such as the 21st Century Town Meeting® have been associated with dialogue, this study mines the specific principles that are present in the meeting's practices, explicating their generative characteristics. It describes participants' perspectives on the process alongside the practitioners' hopes for the process, establishing consistency in praxis. These principles move beyond prescribed methodologies employed to harness nonexpert participation, and allow us to organize disparate theoretical constructs in a useful taxonomy that facilitates freedom in the design process for practitioners seeking to host public dialogue and encourage engagement from lay citizens. In addition, practitioners may glean from this case, commitments specific to *public* dialogue and nonexpert participation. The case strengthens conceptual understandings of the difference between public dialogue models and dialogic theory by foregrounding how concepts (i.e., diversity, transparency, preparedness,

and neutrality) shift in the context of public rather than interpersonal dialogue, and how they enable and constrain participation. These concepts are not inherent in the interaction, but constructed and designed by organizers, thus naming them establishes how to cultivate engagement grounded in dialogic principles.

Next, this case answers the call to provide empirical evidence of the efficacy of public dialogue processes toward influencing social issues by documenting perceived results linking dialogic process and product (Heidelbaugh, 2008). In other words, the case offers insight into why dialogic processes are successful in engaging nonexperts on important social and political issues. New rules and resources for social change around childhood obesity were attributed to the meetings by local organizers. Organizers were not just preaching to the choir of experts. Local organizers of the Chicago meeting said, "A lot of the people that came to the meeting were people that were not involved or engaged with [obesity reform] on a regular, routine basis. There were many more people interested in this issue/topic than expected." Engaging and listening to nonexperts broadened public support needed to influence policies and increase partnerships, media coverage, funding, and credibility on the issue.

These results challenge theoretical assumptions about the wisdom of crowds as simply an aggregate of individually held knowledge, and strengthen research concerned with the efficacy of deliberative process (Gastil, 2000b), particularly dialogic deliberation. We find it doubtful that such transformation could be facilitated by Solomon and Surowiecki's vision of the wisdom of crowds. Without meaningful engagement, different perspectives are internally preserved (Solomon, 2006), rather than mutually influential. The dialogic process described above instead fostered two of the conditions to which Solomon loyally attributes the fidelity of Surowiecki's model—diversity and decentralization. First, diversity is valued, and some may argue, the heart of dialogue; therefore, public dialogue processes are carefully facilitated so as to elicit and honor dissenting viewpoints. Second, the idea of decentralization is so valued in Suroweicki's arguments because an aggregated vote is not weighted any more than any other aggregated vote. In other words, power is neutralized in the separation and aggregation process. However, facilitated public dialogues, such as SAY, attend very specifically to leveling the power between "experts" and nonexperts. In other words, a thoughtful public dialogue process, such as the one described in this case, preserves two of the three conditions argued to be important for garnering the wisdom of crowds, undermining the power of the claim made by aggregate advocates.

The final condition purported to be necessary for eliciting nonexpert wisdom—independence—is challenged by the transformative implications found in this study. This is because aggregate decisions do not allow for learning and justifications that lead to individual decisions. Aggregate decisions do not exchange knowledge and reasons, do not strengthen relationships, or foster trust (i.e. social capital). It is conceivable that aggregate decisions of nonexperts (i.e., polling) could influence rules, such as policy changes at local and state levels and possibly resources such as funding. However, other relationship-based resources such as increased collaboration, enriched media partnerships and perceived credibility are interaction-dependent. A noncommunicative model based on independence may lead to sound policy, but it is incapable of influencing a collaborative infrastructure to implement it. Individual transformation is also unavailable in the aggregate model, which has significant implications for societal issues such as racism, where overcoming prejudice may depend on individual knowledge becoming shared. Thus, the implications of SAY's process for engaging nonexperts are the possibility of individual transformation and access to greater resources than would be available if dialogic meeting processes were not engaged.

Our conclusions illuminate mesolevel (organizing level) constructs that influence meeting design and policy. Additionally, we identified some (macrolevel) social implications despite having had minimal access to microlevel quantitative (i.e., individual changes) and qualitative (specific discussions) data. Future research is needed to articulate the long-term outcomes produced in public dialogues. As well, future research should compare data in communities that make decisions using aggregate models of gleaning nonexpert voices, (such as polling), versus facilitated dialogic models as we continue to locate and understand the wisdom of crowds.

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