Participatory and Deliberative Practitioners in Australia: How Work Context Creates Different Types of Practitioners

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Abstract

Public institutions in Australia are subject to increasing statutory requirements to engage their communities, and consequently the number of practitioners has increased. These participatory and deliberative practitioners design, deliver, and evaluate democratic processes on behalf of public institutions. This article argues that the practitioner body has broadened, where different types of practitioners can now be identified in Australia. This broadening is the result of three main variables: (1) whether practitioners are employed by or contracted to public institutions; (2) whether they are engaged to work on projects with limited or considerable scope; and (3) whether they are focused on limited time frame processes or entire programs. Drawing on the results of a mixed method study, including survey and semi-structured interviews, this article explores the work contexts that shape the contemporary Australian practitioner, drawing lessons that can inform their practice in other contexts.

Keywords

public participation, community engagement, professionalization, facilitators, practitioners

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Introduction

Participatory and deliberative practitioners are a group of emerging professionals (Christensen, 2018a) who undertake important tasks in relation to participatory and deliberative processes such as process design, coordination, procurement, internal advocacy, facilitation, information creation and dissemination, reporting, and evaluation (Bherer, Gauthier & Simard, 2017a; Cooper & Smith, 2012; Hendriks & Carson, 2008; Lee, 2014, 2017). In Australia, practice is being driven by extensive and increasing legislative requirements for public institutions to facilitate public participation (Christensen, 2018b; Grant & Drew, 2017). It is therefore reasonable to infer that a significant number of practitioners are employed by or contracted to public institutions. The purpose of these processes initiated by public institutions varies: from the ambitious creation of democratic innovations to address democratic deficits (Bua & Escobar, 2018; Pratchett, 1999; Smith, 2009) to the less ambitious, and at times tokenistic meeting of statutory requirements (Christensen, 2018b; Leighninger, 2014). Examples of the types of processes include everything from participatory budgeting (Christensen & Grant, 2016; Goldfrank, 2012; Pateman, 2012) to collaborative governance (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson, Nabatchi & Balogh, 2012; Fung & Wright, 2003).

Practitioners can be employed by or contracted to the public, private, not-for-profit, and, increasingly, academic sectors (see Chilvers, 2013; Kahane & Loptson, 2017 for work on "pracademics"). This article is, however, focused on those who are employed by or contracted to the public sector. While the term "participatory and deliberative practitioner" is employed in this context, others, such as "public participation professional" (Bherer et al., 2017a), "public participation practitioners" (Cooper & Smith, 2012), "public engagement professionals" and "consultants" (Lee, 2014, 2015), "deliberation professionals" (Lee, 2015), and "deliberative practitioners" (Hendriks & Carson, 2008) are used to broadly describe the activities of these individuals. Many Australian practitioners use the terms "community engagement practitioner" or "professional." The term "participatory and deliberative practitioners" is used in this article to encompass all these terms, despite the subtle differences that may exist between them.

Arguably, practitioners occupy an important part of many democratic processes. Not only do they undertake functional tasks to ensure that groups of people come together at the same time to discuss and deliberate in a way that can hopefully affect change, but they can also, sometimes unintentionally, influence the processes itself (López Garcia, 2017; Spada & Vreeland, 2013; Steiner, 2012). Because of this status, it is important to ask what influences their practice. What experiences and contextual constraints inform the decisions they make throughout the process? And, ultimately, what sort of impact do they have on the quality of facilitated democratic processes? This article explores these questions by examining the backgrounds and experiences of practitioners and their work contexts and views on practice.

The article builds on existing literature in three main areas. First, it contributes to the discussion on the influence of practitioners over participatory and deliberative processes with which they are involved with by providing more information about these practitioners and their experiences. Second, it shows how both the practitioners and their practice are broadening to such a point where different types of practitioners can now be identified in Australia. These types are defined by three main variables: (1) whether practitioners are employed by or contracted to public institutions; (2) whether they are engaged to work on projects with limited

scope or considerable scope; and (3) whether they focus on limited time frame processes or entire programs. This suggests that it is more likely that there are "communities of practices" rather than a single "community of practice," as Carolyn Hendriks and Lyn Carson (2008) once claimed. Third, it aligns with findings from Europe (Cooper & Smith, 2012; Escobar, 2015, 2017) that participatory and deliberative practice in public institutions brings unique and significant set of challenges for practitioners.

The article is comprised of five main parts. First, a review of literature relating to the influence of the practitioner, the broadening of practice, and the challenges of public institutions is discussed. Second, an overview of the research objectives and mixed methods approach is outlined. The third section presents the findings, including key quantitative data and qualitative data on what informs practitioners' practice and their perceptions of different types of practitioners. The fourth section presents the three main variables that define a practitioner and relates these back to relevant literature. The final section contains concluding remarks and considerations for future research.

Influence of Practitioners

Recent studies have increasingly focused on participatory and deliberative practitioners (Bherer et al., 2017a; Cooper & Smith, 2012), beyond the earlier cursory mention of them warranting more attention (Burgess & Chilvers, 2006; Chilvers, 2008; Smith, 2009). This attention is an acknowledgement of the pivotal role they play in participatory and deliberative processes, and the literature in this area typically examines the influence they can have on both the quality and outcome of discussion and deliberation. The conclusions of this work are somewhat contradictory. Some scholars, such as Jason Pierce, Grant Neeley, and Jeffrey Budziak (2008) and Martin Carcasson and Leah Sprain (2016), conclude that practitioners are a valuable part of the participatory and deliberative processes as their work can enhance the quality of discussion and deliberation. Others argue that practitioners can influence the attitudes and behaviors of participants (Spada & Vreeland, 2013) and that they can manipulate outcomes through their decisions to censor themselves or others (Humphreys, Masters & Sandbu, 2006). And some, such as John Fulwider (2005, p. 17) arrives at a view somewhere in between, conceding that the impact of a moderator is a "hit and miss."

Indeed, practitioners do play a pivotal role as they can affect the quality of democratic processes, for good or ill. Other studies discuss what informs the practice of the participatory and deliberative practitioner, most of which are focused on the normative principles for practice. Included in this work is Jason Chilvers's (2008) study of participatory appraisals, Emmeline Cooper and Graham Smith's (2012) investigation of how British and German practitioners express democratic principles in practice, and the analysis by Jane Mansbridge, Janette Hartz-Karp, Matthew Amengual, and John Gastil (2006) of facilitator norms. In their introduction, Mansbridge and her colleagues (2006, p. 1) state that "[Facilitators] are also influenced by the professional norms they learned through training and their direct experience as facilitators." This article explores the training and experience of practitioners. Many previous studies have focused on either the facilitator or moderator; in contrast, this study takes a wider perspective by referring to participatory and deliberative practitioners. Many practitioners undertake moderation and facilitation together with a number of other roles such as process design, coordination, procurement, internal advocacy, content creation and dissemination, reporting, and evaluating. While this article agrees that practitioners do

influence democratic processes, it posits that this influence is underway long before the practitioner is in the same room with participants.

Broadening of Practice and Practitioners

With practitioners now accepted as an integral part of participatory and deliberative processes, attention is turning to the context within which they work and how their work differs. Much can be drawn from the writings on professionalization and commercialization in the sector (see Bherer et al., 2017a for a comprehensive account). In their seminal work exploring the growing commercialization of deliberative democracy and the work of deliberative consultants, Hendriks and Carson (2008) concluded that practitioners were operating in a "community of practice" rather than a marketplace as such. The work of Caroline Lee and her associates challenges this view. After conducting a survey of 434 self-identified dialogue and deliberation practitioners, Lee and Francesca Polletta (2009) was able to paint a picture of a group of practitioners from a variety of work and educational backgrounds employed in a number of settings. These empirical findings were built upon in Lee's later work which further highlights the challenges related to the context and professionalization with which practitioners are grappling (Lee, 2014, 2015, 2017; Lee, McNulty & Shaffer, 2015).

The literature on professionalization can be further explored by examining the broadening of roles and types of practitioners. Chilvers (2013, 2017) examined science and technology public dialogue actors in the United Kingdom and identified four main actor types: studying, practicing, orchestrating, and coordinating. This finding allows for a greater understanding of the work of practitioners. Different agencies and groups may work across all or some of the types. For example, "decision institutions," such as the government, primarily operate in the orchestrating space but are also present to a degree in the other three areas. Also relevant is the work of Laurence Bherer, Mario Gauthier, and Louis Simard (2017b) on how practitioners reconcile their impartiality in a commercial context, with findings providing a useful framework for understanding the roles and types of practitioners. Bherer and her colleagues (2017b) classify practitioners along two distinct lines: (1) those who work on politically salient projects (defined as large and controversial) versus those who do not, and (2) those who support the project and those who do not. These two lines create four "personalities" of practitioners: the "promoter" who works on politically salient projects and supports the project; the "militant" who works on less politically salient projects but supports the project; the "reformer" who works on politically salient projects but is less supportive of the project; and the "facilitator" who works on less politically salient projects and is less supportive of the project. These four personalities have different approaches to the type of work they do and a different view of impartiality. Of particular interest is the "promoter," who, rather than conveying impartiality, endorses the position of their client. Bherer and her colleagues (2017a) argue that the market dominance of "promoters" has been accelerated by large organizations that typically offer community engagement services as an addition to their broader commercial activities in engineering, communication, and public relations. They conclude that the "promoter" type has a growing influence and poses the biggest risk to participatory democracy. This study expands the understanding of practitioner groups through an investigation of practitioner cohort and the variables that shape their practice.

Practitioner and Public Institutions

Also relevant to this research is literature which explore the practitioner and their interface with public institutions. Cooper and Smith (2012) studied German and British practitioners by examining their commitment to democratic principles, and identified the constraints practitioners face in their work context, including the failure of organizations (predominately public authorities) to understand the demands of participation, and those that arise from the structure and culture of public authorities. Other relevant research in this area outline the effects of institutional frameworks on practice, such as how process design conforms to frameworks in Italy (Lewanski & Ravazzi, 2017) and how the market arranges itself in response to institutionalization in France (Mazeuad & Nonjon, 2017). Finally, emerging work examines practitioners who are employed in the public sector, such as that of Oliver Escobar (2015, 2017) who concentrates on "official" practitioners (referred to in this study as practitioners employed in public institutions). Escobar (2015, 2017) draws attention to the backstage work of public practitioners and their struggles in navigating politics and public institutions. This study contributes to existing literature in this area by extending the discussion on how public institutions can affect practitioners through an examination of the perceived differences between those who are employed in the public sector and those who contracted to it.

Objectives and Methodology

This research provides an opportunity to gain greater understanding on the influence of practitioners of participatory and deliberative processes and the work they do in the context of Australian public institutions. As such, the primary research objective for this study was to identify actors who practice engagement in Australia and what informs the way they practice, with the view that these findings would then answer the broader question of what impact practitioners have on the quality of facilitated democratic processes. The current research is part of a larger explanatory mixed methods study which consists of a survey, the themes of which were then explored in a series of semi-structured interviews.

Given that the size of the practitioner population is unknown (and feasibly unknowable), the survey was open to all who self-identified as practitioners since sampling techniques were unavailable. The survey was promoted and distributed through email lists of practitioner organizations—the International Association of Public Participation Australasia and Engage 2 Act—and practitioners were encouraged to recruit others in their networks. It was opened to Australian practitioners in August 2017, which included questions related to demographics, practice, and professionalization (see Appendix for relevant questions). A total of 375 complete or mostly complete surveys were received. Microsoft Excel was used for analysis.

Themes from the survey—in this case practitioners' backgrounds and their views on types of practice and practitioners—were then explored in 20 semi-structured interviews. The sample was then narrowed to focus on senior practitioners who were employed by or regularly contracted to public institutions. The purposive sample of practitioners was selected from a mix of five Australian states, gender (15 females and five males), and employment.[1] Interviewees were chosen on the assumption that they would have divergent views to ensure a degree of data saturation. The interviews were conducted between November 2018 and January

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[1] Four were employed by a local government, another four in the state government, and 12 were working in the private sector (four of whom had previous significant public sector experience and all of whom work predominately with public sector clients).

2019, which lasted for 60 to 90 minutes and were conducted in person or via video conference (Zoom), with participants receiving the questions in advance. The interviews were transcribed and the data was analyzed using a qualitative research software (Dedoose) to organize the findings.

Findings

Demographics

Presented below is the demographic of the 375 practitioners in the survey, indicating the characteristics of the practitioner group, particularly their work, training, and educational backgrounds, which form the basis of the qualitative discussions to follow.

Gender. Survey responses predominately came from females. Over three-quarters (77.6%) of practitioners identified as female, with 22.1% identifying as male, and 0.3% identifying as "other." Not surprisingly, this is disproportionate with larger workforce demographics, where females represent 47.5% of the total workforce (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). There is evidence of this gender dominance in other polities as well. In a 2009 survey of predominantly North American dialogue and deliberation practitioners, Lee (2015, p. 85) reported that 62% of respondents were female. The domination of female practitioners may be problematic, not only from the point of view of not being reflective of the publics served but from the perspective that participatory and deliberative practice may be viewed as "women's work," thereby bringing with it issues that other gendered professions share (Witz, 1992).
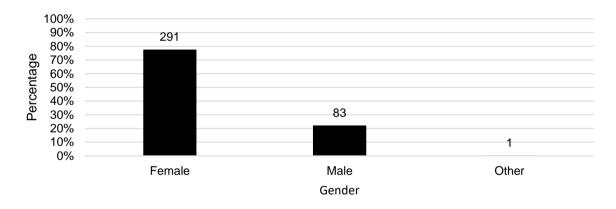

Figure 1. Gender identification of participatory and deliberative practitioners (n=375).

Cultural and ethnic identification. Rather than probing for their ancestry, the survey instead asked practitioners if they identified strongly with any cultural and/or ethnic groups. This question was designed to elicit participants' cultural and linguistic ties and whether they were reflective of the communities with which they worked.[2] Of the 368 responses (98.1% of total respondents), more than two-thirds (70.9%) did not strongly identify with a cultural and ethnic group; 18.9% identified as north-west European (including England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Western Europe, and Northern Europe); and 1.9% identified as Aboriginal and Torres

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[2] In Australia, the category of race is not used for statistical purposes such as the National Census. The National Census collects data and reports on: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identification, country of birth, language spoken at home, and ancestry. Nicholas Biddle, Siew-Ean Khoo, and John Taylor (2015) provide a succinct overview of the history of race and ethnicity demographics in Australia.

Strait Islander. All other regions listed were 1.3% or less of the practitioner group (see Figure 2). These data concerning cultural and ethnic identity do not conform to standard practice across Australia since the figures in this study differ from the Australian census (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016) in three main ways. First, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in the census represented 2.7% of the total population. Second, the census showed that after Australia (66.6%), England (3.9%), and New Zealand (2.2%), the top countries of birth were China (2.2% of total population), India (1.9%), and the Philippines (1%). Third, according, to the census, 72.7% of Australian households speak English at home while other common languages include Mandarin (2%), Arabic (1.4%), Cantonese (1.2%), Vietnamese (1.2%), and Italian (1.2%). The census data suggest an underrepresentation of cultural and ethnic diversity in the practitioner group. If the practitioner group does not reflect the publics they serve, it is likely that they are (unintentionally) reinforcing mainstream cultural biases which contribute to marginalization (see Doerr, 2018) and, consequently, the weakening of democratic principles upon which participation and deliberation are based.
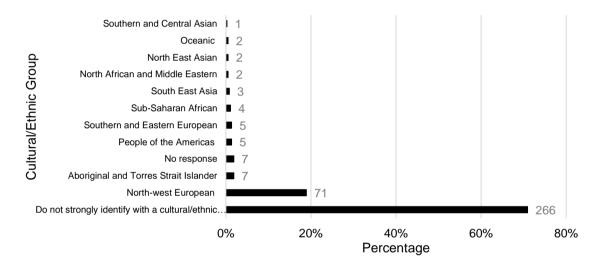

Figure 2. Cultural and ethnic group identification of participatory and deliberative practitioners (n=375).

Employment. The clear majority of respondents (85.9%) worked as employees, followed by self-employed/solo operators (7.2%), owners-managers of private businesses of various sizes (6.4%), and finally those currently seeking work (0.5%) as shown in Figure 3.

Further division into sector of employment showed that over half of the employees were working for a local government (58.4% of all respondents). The next largest area comprised the self-employed and owner-managers (13.6%), followed by state government (12.3%), the private sector (10.4%), the not-for-profit sector (2.7%), federal government (1.6%), and higher education employees (0.5%) as illustrated in Figure 4. For comparison, a recent survey of Australian local governments reported that half of the councils had dedicated community engagement staff and that the average number in these councils was 2.49 staff members (Christensen & McQuestin, 2018).
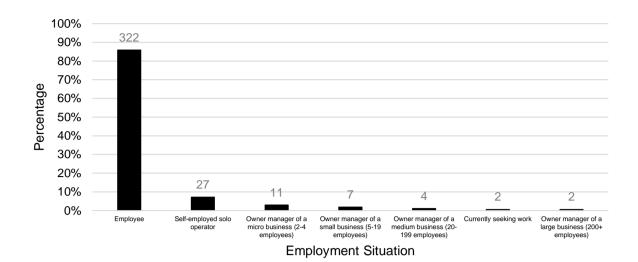
Figure 3. Employment situation of participatory and deliberative practitioners (n=375).
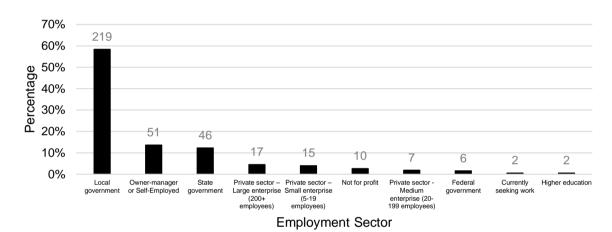

Figure 4. Employer of participatory and deliberative practitioners (n=375).

Training. Without a direct pathway to paid employment, it can be assumed that skills and knowledge are acquired practically and through training and tertiary study units. Survey participants were asked if they attended any training sessions in the previous decade, and were required to identify who delivered these sessions. A total of 334 participants (89.1% of total responses) confirmed they participated in a training or tertiary course, with the average number of courses being 1.78. As Figure 5 shows, the most popular course was the International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) module and/or certificate (57.1%). This was followed by training provided by private providers (40.8%), training provided by organizations' employees to their staff (32.5%), tertiary units (23.2%), training provided by not-for-profit organizations (22.9%), and other training (1.6%), which includes those provided by professional associations and networks such as state government departments and local government associations.
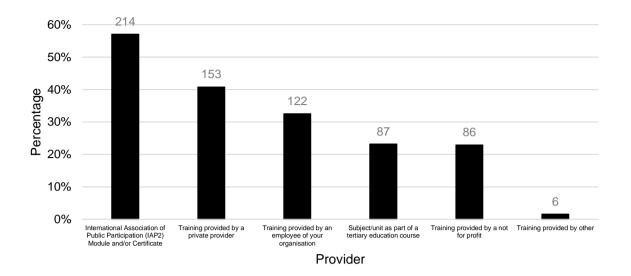
Figure 5. Training and short courses attended by participatory and deliberative practitioners in previous 10 years (n=334).

Sector experience. Practitioners reported that they were unlikely to remain in the same employ and some worked across different sectors, so respondents were asked for which sectors they had designed and delivered community engagement in the previous decade, as either an employee or a contractor. The majority of participatory and deliberative practitioners had experience in the public sector, confirming that the legislative environment is likely a major driver for practice. Reported experience (see Figure 6) was based on employment in the following sectors: local government (82.1%), state government (45.9%), not-for-profit (38.4%), private (32%), infrastructure (25.3%), planning (22.1%), environment (21.6%), federal government (14.9%), health (14.9%), disaster and emergency response (13.3%), and higher education (9.1%). While this question included experience gained either as an employee or a contractor to the public sector, the public sector employee practitioner or "official public participation professional" often undertakes different duties (see Escobar, 2015, 2017).
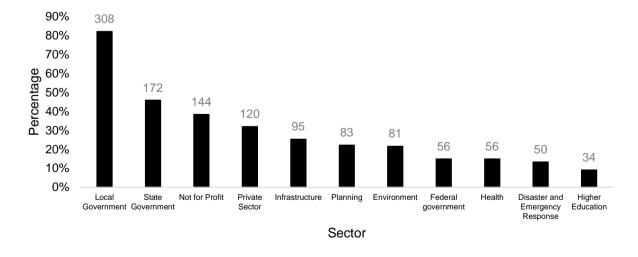

Figure 6. Sector experience of participatory and deliberative practitioners (n=374).

Experience and expertise. Two questions delved further into participants' experience and expertise. First, respondents were asked how many years of experience they had in community engagement. As expected, responses reflected a bell curve ranging from less than one year of experience to more than 31 years, with the median number of 6 to 10 years. The survey question did not elicit whether a respondent had solely focused on community engagement during this time or whether they had occasional or supervisory involvement, and therefore the results are likely to contain both situations. To address this discrepancy, a second question was asked about their level of expertise. Using the scale based on the Stuart and Hubert Dreyfus's (1980) five-stage model of skill acquisition, respondents were asked to rank their level of expertise. Across all years of experience, only 1.3% identified as "novice," 15.7% identified as "experienced beginners," 28.5% as "practitioners," 40.5% as "knowledgeable practitioners," and 13.3% as "experts." Interestingly, those with two or fewer years of experience were most likely to identify as "experienced beginners" rather than novices. For those with between 6 and 31 years of experience, "knowledgeable practitioner" was the most popular identification. The results of both these questions are presented in Figure 7.
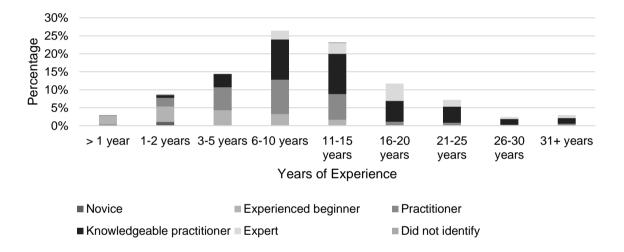

Figure 7. Years of experience and levels of expertise (n=375).

Qualifications.[3] When asked about their highest level of qualification, one-third (34%) of respondents had postgraduate degrees, 30.7% had bachelor degrees, 10.7% had attained advanced diplomas or diplomas, 17.6% had graduate diplomas or graduate certificates, and 7% had certificate-level qualifications (see Figure 8). Participatory and deliberative practitioners had considerable higher educational attainment rates, with 64.4% holding a bachelor or postgraduate degree. In the wider Australian population, 22% hold a bachelor or postgraduate degree (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016).

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[3] In Australia, diplomas and advanced diplomas are postsecondary qualifications; bachelor degrees are the standard university qualification; and graduate certificates, graduate diplomas and masters are all postgraduate qualifications of increasing duration.
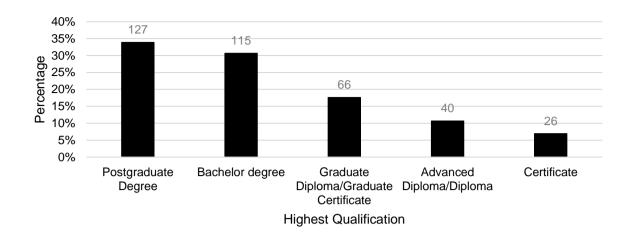
Figure 8. Highest level of qualification of participatory and deliberative practitioners (n=374).

Qualification areas. While the sample was highly qualified, there are no dedicated higher education qualifications for community engagement in Australia (Christensen, 2018a). Consequently, practitioners' qualifications were in other disciplines, and the survey sought to identify these by asking respondents to identify their discipline areas from a list of 17 related fields. A total of 336 respondents (89.6% of the total) indicated they had qualifications in as many as 10 of these fields, with the average number of qualifications areas being 2.7 per person. As Figure 9 demonstrates, the most popular qualification areas were in management (38.1%), communications and media (33.3%), community development (29.5%), social sciences (25.3%), and social/community planning and research (24.4%). Also represented was organizational development/corporate strategy (19.9%), conflict resolution/mediation (18.2%), and public administration/policy (17.6%).

As senior practitioners, interviewees were invited to reflect on these findings. Many were surprised by the number of practitioners who held management qualifications, although a couple of interviewees thought it was reflective of where final decision-making for engagement sits in an organization and how it is understood. One practitioner reflected that a practitioner is often not viewed as an authority figure and therefore advice is sometimes or regularly ignored, with decisions about approaches being made by a management or executive team who are likely to err on the side of caution.
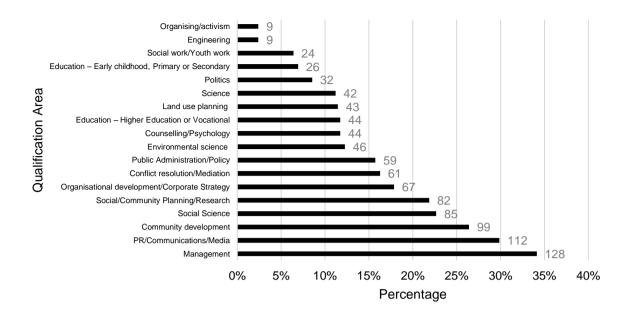
Figure 9. Areas of qualification of participatory and deliberative practitioners (n=336).

What Informs Practitioners' Practice?

As shown above, participatory and deliberative practitioners come to the practice with a wide diversity of knowledge and skills gained through formal and informal learning, as well as workplace experience across different sectors. This differs from other practices, such as teaching, nursing, or accounting, where degree programs, along with the registration requirements of professional associations, result in a core set of knowledge and skills in practitioner groups. It begs the question of whether the diversity in knowledge and experiences of practitioners put community engagement practice (and ultimately democracy) at a disadvantage. Or, on the contrary, is the diversity of knowledge and skills in the practitioner cohort a unique strength? While the answer to these questions is beyond the scope of the research, interview participants were invited to reflect on what has shaped their practice, thereby creating a starting point from which to consider such issues.

Previous experience and personal traits. When asked what influenced their practice, respondents identified two main factors: previous work experience, study, and training; and individual traits such as their capabilities, interests, and personalities. Practitioners spoke of how previous work experience proved useful in their current practice. Examples included grassroots social work in highly disadvantaged areas which built "people skills, communication skills, conflict resolution, counselling," and public sector jobs in policy, public administration, and community development. Most practitioners spoke of how they honed their knowledge and skills on the job, often through a process of learning from mistakes:

> I would say I've done most of my learning by making mistakes and trialing and doing things. There are handbooks and processes out there that you can use as a template to give you that understanding but one size does not fit all.

Many practitioners cited short courses and workplace training in engagement and facilitation as instrumental in their practice. Views of how formal study and qualifications shaped their practice were more divided, with some acknowledging, for example, that their degrees gave them knowledge and skills in areas such as public administration, qualitative data analysis, and

critical thinking. Others who had qualifications in areas such as business and science believed their studies did not prepare them for participatory and deliberative practice. As one practitioner succinctly suggested, "I think [your practice] it is a bit of both (study and experience)… your experience will either align with your study or it will broaden it out."

In addition to previous work experience, study, and training, practitioners also spoke about how their individual traits influenced practice. Some spoke of how participatory and deliberative practitioners are often those who are comfortable with ambiguity and "mess" as opposed to those who prefer structure and certainty (i.e., those available in more technical professions). One practitioner spoke of the positive experience of using psychometric testing to employ practitioners stating, "I see people that have got the best qualifications but have no time management skills, so the engagement will unravel. They need the ability to be flexible – to change course at the drop of a hat." Some practitioners also spoke of how values influence practice—as one said, "I know people that have the community development values… some of them come from professional experience; sometimes it's just about how people are."

Practitioner diversity: A benefit or a disadvantage to the practice? As practices professionalize, it is inevitable that standardization will occur in different areas, such as training, accreditation, or process (see Christensen, 2018a). With practitioners coming to the field with a wide range of experiences, qualifications, and skills, it is fair to assume that variations in practice may result. Some of the practitioners interviewed viewed this diversity as a strength, while others as a weakness. Those who saw it as a strength spoke of how the different backgrounds give their practice greater strength:

> I think it's a really good thing. I find it really exciting that the people working with engagement come from such a range of different background—I think it really strengthens the approach. The work we do generally encompasses a whole range, particularly if you're working with, say, infrastructure projects.

Another practitioner provided more detail:

> The background and qualification area might lead to a different style of doing engagement, and this is making an assumption but the management people might have really great insight in internal decision-making within organizations, so that would be useful. The [communications] people would be presumably really great at sharing information in a way that's appealing to people and makes it easy for them. So, I think all of them bring something special. Social science people will bring a level of understanding around qualitative data and how they manage that. The difference between this and other professions is people come from somewhere else as distinct from other professions: they come through school; they do a course and then they go and practice; and they learn from those people who've had the same journey.

Using a similar logic, the reverse may also be true:

> I think [qualifications and experience] impact on their skills in engagement. So, somebody who's been through a planning degree will have a great understanding of legislative frameworks and planning concepts but not necessarily [have] a great ability to negotiate or to write clear information or present a clear logical argument to somebody. I think it impacts on the skills that you bring to the practice.

These comments suggest that practitioners who operate by themselves or who do not have a

mentor available during their practice may rely more heavily on their previous knowledge and experience.

While practitioners may lack some knowledge or skills, those interviewed were most concerned about biases that previous training and practice may bring:

> One of the things that professional engagement practitioners seek to do is not to color the outcome of the feedback. You don't go in and say "We've got this great project we're going to show you and it's got all these shiny bits on it and it's really great you're going to love it." We go in and say "This project is aiming to do this and these are the benefits that it's aiming to bring to the community and here's the impact." So, you try to have that balanced approach. I think the risk of having people who come from particular areas is they're going to… they may be colored by that. Probably those who come from all the engineering and planning fields—if they think something represents good planning sense, they may be more likely to try and skew their discussion in a certain direction because it suits their frame of reference.

There are also inherent biases which practitioners need to be aware of:

> There are inherent personal biases that you have, and you have to be mindful of them because if you're not, they're going to play out in how you analyze the data. So, it's everything from how you might write up and [frame] engagement to the types of questions and how you write questions. You know, leading questions versus those open-ended questions… the past experiences and skill set of engagement practitioners can sway and change a particular engagement strategy.

The concern with these gaps and biases amongst practitioners is that the practice may be negatively affected, which has consequences for the integrity of the democratic processes being designed and delivered. One interviewee summarized the paradox of diversity:

> I think its strength (diversity) is also its Achilles heel. How do you get that group of people to agree enough that you do become a profession? It's almost as if the diversity is so strong yet the tipping point is that it can make it completely weak because it doesn't bind together… Diversity is great, but you've got to have a home base of what's acceptable, what standard is agreed to. It's no different to medicine. We have GPs [General Practitioners] that want to practice one way and GPs that don't agree … At the end of the day you've got a basic standard that they must adhere to, or their professionalism and their credentials will fall apart. I think that's what we need to have an understanding of with engagement. It's not going to move forward if we don't have some stronger walls around it.

Is a degree of standardization needed? If there is a need for stronger walls, or requirements for standardization, where and what should these be? A couple of practitioners raised the need to be reflective in practice:

> If you're good as a social worker, or a teacher, or other sorts of professions, it's the extent [of] how you think about your role and what you're doing—there are some people who move into facilitation who maybe haven't interrogated themselves that much… I think there's some who don't seem to doubt themselves at all and plough ahead and are not that mindful of the impact they are having on other people.

The need for common knowledge and principles was raised by others:

> I think so long as the people who are working in the area of engagement have some kind of universal understanding of: the core principles, theory of the work, its place in democracy, its social justice [and] human rights underpinnings. And that's my view; someone else might see that quite differently. An engineer… would say it's all about risk. [They] wouldn't even care that much about the human rights element.

The views from practitioners reveal that there is depth and complexity, not only in the work of participatory and deliberative practitioners, but in how they are understood and how they understand themselves and their work. It is an area which warrants further study to determine the factors at play, and how these have impacts on the quality of democratic processes.

Different Types of Practitioners

Given the diversity of professional backgrounds of practitioners and the different influences that shaped their practices, it is reasonable to assume that there are different types of practitioners. In an attempt to increase the depth of understanding of practitioners, this section explores how they differ, rather than categorizing them. The question of whether there were different types of practitioners was posed to the senior practitioners interviewed and, while there were no clearly delineated groups or types of practitioners, there were three identifiable themes to the comments: first was the position of the practitioner (whether they were internal or external to the organization); second was the scope of the engagement processes undertaken by different practitioners (with projects with quite limited scope on one end and considerable scope on the other); and third was the outlook of the practitioner (whether they were focused on one-off projects or were involved in the oversight of ongoing processes and programs).

Practitioner position: Internal–external. During the interviews, practitioners referred to themselves and others using a variety of descriptors such as: "government practitioners," "public sector practitioners," "internal practitioners," "external providers," "consultants," "organization-based practitioners," amongst others. Broadly, these descriptors delineate between practitioners who were employed in a public institution (internal) and those who were contracted by public institutions (external). There were three identified differences between the two groups. First was the acknowledgement that internal practitioners have an additional set of challenges related to navigating bureaucracy. As one previous internal practitioner described, "[Internal practitioners] have to navigate all of that red tape. It's a real challenge. That's why we get [burned-out] and people leave the sector because it's a hard job to do." Second was the identification that the type of work varies, with larger and more complex engagement processes often contracted to external practitioners while "the smaller and less controversial tends to be done in house, project officer kind of thing." Finally—and a likely consequence of the previous difference—is a perception from both internal and external practitioners that external practitioners are valued more. Practitioners gave examples of being internal, where their professional advice was considered but not viewed as authoritative, and how there were often a lot of other people in the organization who would tell them "how to do their job." A juxtaposition to this is the view of external practitioners where "people buy you in as you are, so they always want to get their money's worth and they listen to what you say."

Scope: Limited–considerable. There was a recognition, and also division, amongst those interviewed that some practitioners worked on engagement processes where the projects had limited scope and others worked on processes where there was considerable scope to make change. Limited scope projects include the delivery of infrastructure projects, where strategic

decisions such as the project itself and major decisions such as position or alignment and size had been made, and engagement was now focused on supporting the construction phase. Considerable scope projects include those such as major public policy processes, where participants can assist in shaping major policy decisions such as governance structures and budget spends. As one practitioner rationalized:

> I suspect [the divide between practitioners who engage on strategic policy versus those who engage on planning and construction projects, is] to do with developing things – where there's lots and lots of negotiables …[or]… where there's not many. So there's that bit around strategic engagement processes [with lots of negotiables] and those that are around let's get this built or done [with less negotiables].

Some of the other practitioners conflated the issue of project scope with the level of influence offered to the community, and they made reference to the IAP2 Spectrum (2007), which presents a linear progression of "increasing levels of public impact" with five levels: inform, consult, involve, collaborate, and empower.

> There's always been this divide between the inform/consult end of the spectrum versus the involve/collaborate/empower end of the spectrum.

Technically, very high levels of influence can be granted to the community on limited scope projects, but the "negotiables" will limit the input: for example, the color of a facility versus the decision to build the facility in the first place. Nevertheless, limited scope projects are viewed by many practitioners as a different type of participatory process. One practitioner viewed this conundrum as a split between those who understand that "not every decision can be shaped by the community" but engagement can "provide a platform for the best possible outcome for the community" versus those who "believe in the community shaping every element." A couple of practitioners referred to it as the "communications" versus "community development" divide. Most acknowledged that there was a tension between the two groups.

Outlook: Limited–ongoing. The third theme that emerged was that some practitioners were in positions that focused on processes with limited time frames, while others were in positions that focused on ongoing processes with no definite end. Limited time frame processes included project work and one-off facilitation of methods. Ongoing processes included oversight of multiple projects in the same location and/or for the same organization, and building internal capacity and support. The focus was usually dictated by the practitioner's position of being either inside or external to the organization where they work. Those working on limited time frame processes reported focusing on involving the community to a certain point in time, such as reaching an agreement on a design or construction of infrastructure. In fact, in large organizations, these two outcomes are facilitated by different teams. To quote one practitioner, "They're doing once-off transactional engagement. They're not thinking about engagement at a later date, it's around 'this is our topic and project and we only talking about that stuff.'" Those with a focus on oversight and ongoing processes are required to have skills and knowledge beyond community engagement and into management, capacity building, and education and organizational change, as this participant explained:

> About a year into the job [in a large public institution] I woke up with the sweats and went, "Oh my God, I'm not an Engagement Manager, I am changing this organization. I'm driving organizational change!" I hadn't read or done any kind of theory around change management and in the next couple of weeks I thought, "Right, I'm going to research and find out what this is about," and realized that I was actually changing

people's perceptions and it was around education and awareness and around the value of what we were doing and how you take them on the journey to build their capacity to do it. So that's completely different than just putting in a new system or process and making people do it. To have that, you actually need to drive organizational buy-in, an education process.

Practitioners with program experience spoke of how their approach was more developmental: they tended to support and encourage less experienced practitioners and key stakeholders to slowly improve practice, rather than enforce high standards for all processes. They acknowledged that this was problematic from a practice point of view but necessary to build support for the practice in the organization.

Different Types of Practitioners in Australia

By reflecting on demographics, training and education, work experience of practitioners, and their views of what informs their practice and work context, one view emerges on the different types of participatory and deliberative practitioners in Australia. This research, with its social constructivist lens, finds that there are three defining variables: (1) whether practitioners are internal or external to public institutions, (2) whether the projects which they work on have considerable scope or limited scope for the community to have influence, and (3) whether their work focused on one-off or limited processes or entire programs (see Figure 10). These variables are situational, shaped by their position to the public institution and the type of work the institution does. While situational, practitioners presumably have some autonomy over their choice of position and employer, although they may be motivated by gaining any type of relevant experience and an income, particularly if they are less experienced. While these three variables can total nine different combinations and therefore nine different types of practitioners, it is not my intention to create a typology of practitioners as it would serve no useful purpose except to create categories. In addition, the range for some, such as scope, is often situated on a spectrum rather than at either end. Instead, it is hoped that this typology draws attention to how a practitioner's work context influences participatory and deliberative practice.
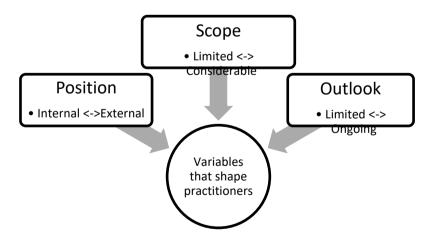

Figure 10. Three variables that shape practitioners.

When compared with previous research, this study shows similarities, differences, and nuances. There are similarities when compared with Escobar's (2015, 2017) studies of "official practitioners," which align to those who are positioned internally in the Australian context. Escobar discussed how official practitioners are wanted or unwanted, which partially aligns

with the findings here on how internal practitioners are sometimes undervalued, particularly when compared with external practitioners. The difficulties of navigating bureaucracies and the internal advocacy work required by internal practitioners also correlates in the Australian context. There are also some similarities and some nuances when compared with the framework of Bherer and her colleagues (2017b) on practitioner personalities which discusses two variables: whether projects are politically salient and whether practitioners are supportive of the project. While those two lines do not correlate directly with those found in this research, there are some parallels: political salience is closely related to scope, the difference being that Bherer and her colleagues (2017b) described projects that are large and controversial, whereas scope here relates to the quantity and significance of project negotiables. Forthcoming research adjacent to this study has found that Australian practitioners view impartiality differently than those in other contexts preferring to refer to an ambiguous "independence" rather than neutrality as traditionally understood. Nevertheless, the themes of work context are common to all.

Conclusion and Future Research

The findings contribute empirical data on the demographics, education, training, and experience of practitioners, as well as how they understand their work. The study has drawn attention to the work— and what may inform it—that practitioners do in addition to the role of facilitation or mediation. In addition, the findings suggest that the broadening of practice and practitioners means that it is fair to assume that there are multiple "communities of practices" rather than a single "community of practice," and that being internal or external to public institutions is likely to influence how practitioners can effectively do their work. Consequently, this study has confirmed the three themes identified in the literature: the influential role of practitioners; the broadening of practice which has resulted in different types of practitioners now being recognizable; and that public institutions face complex challenges in their participatory and deliberative work.

There are a number of avenues for future research. As highlighted in the introduction, this research is a modest attempt to answer the question of how experiences and contextual constraints inform the decisions that practitioners make in their work on participatory and deliberative processes. This question was designed as a precursor to the larger question of what impact practitioners have on the quality of the democratic processes that they design, facilitate, and coordinate. There is the opportunity to undertake some comparative research between practitioner cohorts, as well as experiments that investigate the decision-making processes of practitioners, how and why they differ, and the effect of these differences on participatory and deliberative quality. There is even the opportunity to explore whether practitioners would benefit from some standardization around core content, skills, and values, which may be needed to serve as a protective factor for democratic practice.

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Appendix

Excerpt – Relevant Questions in the Community Engagement Practitioner Survey

I.   About you

Which decade were you born in?

- 1940s
- 1950s
- 1960s
- 1970s
- 1980s
- 1990s
- 2000s

Which gender do you identify with?

- Male
- Female
- Other

Do you identify strongly with any of the cultural and ethnic groups listed?

- Do not strongly identify with a cultural and ethnic group
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
- North African and Middle Eastern
- North East Asian
- North-west European (British, Irish, Western European, Northern European)
- Oceanian (South Sea Islander, Maori, Melanesian, Papuan, Micronesian, Polynesian)
- People of the Americas (North, South, Central, Caribbean)
- South East Asia
- Southern and Central Asian
- Southern and Eastern European
- Sub-Saharan African

II.   Your Experience and Qualifications

How many years of experience do you have in community engagement?

- Less than 1 year
- 1–2 years
- 3–5 years
- 6–10 years
- 11–15 years
- 16–20 years
- 21–25 years
- 26–30 years
- 31+ years

What level of expertise do you have in community engagement?

- Novice
- Experienced beginner
- Practitioner
- Knowledgeable practitioner
- Expert

What is your employment situation? Select all that apply.

- Employee
- Self-employed solo operator
- Owner-manager of a micro business (2–4 employees)
- Owner-manager of a small business (5–19 employees)
- Owner-manager of a medium business (20–199 employees)
- Owner-manager of a large business (200+ employees)
- Volunteer
- Retired
- Currently seeking work
- Other, please specify

Who are you employed by? (If "employee" in previous question)

- Federal government
- State government
- Local government
- Private sector: Micro (2–4 employees)
- Private sector: Small enterprise (5–19 employees)
- Private sector: Medium enterprise (20–199 employees)
- Private sector: Large enterprise (200+ employees)
- Not for Profit
- Higher education
- Other, please specify

What is the level of the highest qualification you have completed?

- Certificate
- Advanced Diploma/Diploma
- Bachelor degree
- Graduate Diploma/Graduate Certificate
- Postgraduate degree

Please indicate the areas in which you have qualifications and experience.

- Community development
- Conflict resolution/Mediation
- Counseling/Psychology
- Education – Early childhood, Primary or Secondary
- Education – Higher Education or Vocational

- Engineering
- Environmental Science
- Land use planning
- Management
- Organizational development/Corporate Strategy
- Organizing/activism
- Politics
- PR/Communications/Media
- Public Administration/Policy
- Science
- Social Science
- Social work
- Social/Community Planning/Research
- Other, please specify

In the past 10 years, have you participated in any training or short courses to assist in your community engagement practice?

- International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) Module and/or Certificate
- Subject/unit as part of a tertiary education course
- Training provided by a not for profit
- Training provided by a private provider
- Training provided by an employee of your organization
- Other, please specify

Which of the following sectors have you designed and/or delivered community engagement for in the last 10 years (as an employee or a contractor/consultant)? Select all that apply.

- Federal government
- State government
- Local government
- Private sector
- Higher education
- Not for Profit
- Health
- Planning
- Infrastructure
- Environment
- Disaster and emergency response
- Other, please specify