

Between virtue and profession: Theorising the rise of professionalised public participation practitioners

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Abstract

Participatory planning practice is changing in response to the rise of specially trained public participation practitioners who intersect with but are also distinct from planners. These practitioners are increasingly being professionalised through new standards of competence defined by their industry bodies. The implications of this are not well accounted for in empirical studies of participatory planning, nor in the theoretical literature that seeks to understand both the potential and problems of more deliberative approaches to urban decision-making. In this paper, we revisit the sociological literature on the professions and use it to critically interrogate an observed tension between the ‘virtues’ of public participation (justice, equity and democracy) and efforts to consolidate public participation practice into a distinct profession that interacts with but also sits outside of professional planning.

Keywords

participatory planning, public engagement industry, professionalisation, discourse, best practice, standards

In western democratic contexts, public participation is a well-established part of planning that is grounded in a long theoretical tradition. Critiques directed at rational-comprehensive

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planning, coupled with increased recognition of social and cultural pluralism, demanded new ways of planning in the 'public interest'. Friedmann's theory of transactive planning (1973) provided an early account of these changes and laid the conceptual foundations for the development of more deliberative and communicative approaches that were extended through the work of Forester (1999), Healey (1997) and Innes (1995) during the 'collaborative turn' of the 1990s, and later in the emergence of agonism in the 2000s (Hillier, 2003; Ploger, 2004). More recent works have laid bare questions about planning's relationship to democracy (Huq, 2020; MirafTAB, 2009), as well as exposed some of the contestation and contingencies of participation in diverse planning contexts (Alfasi, 2010; Zakhour, 2020). While these works remain sources of inspiration and critique, they do not engage with the evolution of participation as a professional practice.

In more neoliberal planning contexts where the authors of this paper write from and where public engagement remains a critical component to planning processes, participation has become an 'industry' (Lee and Romano, 2013). In these contexts, this industry includes 'the for-profit and non-profit' entities that are 'paid to supply public engagement services and products' (Lee, 2015: 57), the public participation practitioners working in the industry intersect with, but are also distinct from, the planning profession. These practitioners include the external consultants that local government planning departments hire to design and implement public participation (Lee, 2015) and those working for government agencies that create the standards for other departments' approaches to public participation (Bherer et al., 2021). In Canadian municipalities, these public engagement practitioners are often located in the communications department, providing guidance and oversight to all municipal staff engaged in public participation, including professional planners, while in Australia, local and state governments are increasingly looking to public engagement consultants to run public participation processes with planners maintaining a more technocratic role regarding the provision of expertise. While the specialized role assigned to these practitioners may elevate the overall quality and rigour of the participatory processes, it also shifts the grounds upon which public participation is conducted, with significant changes to not only who is doing the work but also to whose organizational and professional norms are guiding the process.

Planning scholars working in western, anglophone and neoliberal planning contexts have documented the growing influence of consultants and raised concern over how these private sector actors are shaping public sector processes (Linovski, 2019; Parker et al., 2020; Raco, 2018; Steele, 2009). We seek to build on this work by drawing attention to the specific implications for participatory planning. Our more substantial contribution is to extend the frame of analysis beyond individual consultants and firms and to consider the growing influence of the professional bodies that shape the formation of a new 'category of expert' (Bherer and Lee, 2019: 196) charged with designing and convening community engagement. In our respective countries, these 'community engagement specialists' are evolving into a distinct profession through the training and certification efforts of their professional networking bodies. The professionalisation of public participation practitioners has the potential to set new standards and codes of practice that will powerfully shape the work of community engagement specialists and professional planners alike. We focus our attention on the International Association for Public Participation as it is

particularly active in our respective countries of Canada and Australia and is the most prominent example of a professional networking body for community engagement practitioners. But it is certainly not the only example; the National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation in the US, the Institut de la Concertation in France and Sciencewise in the UK are other examples of organisations where efforts to increase or improve deliberation lie at the centre of their development (Bherer et al., 2017).

In this paper, we aim to advance the theory of participatory planning in western neoliberal contexts so that it better accounts for what might be described as the professionalisation of participation as a practice in these settings. We begin with a more fulsome account of the rise of professionalised public participation practitioners, homing in on an observed tension in the contexts in which we write from between these individuals' collective self-image as values-driven practitioners and the economic necessity to use professional credentials to legitimise and distinguish one's work in an increasingly crowded market. We frame this as a tension between virtue and profession, arguing that the longstanding sociological literature on the professions offers several conceptual tools that support a more robust and critical interrogation of professionalised public participation practitioners.

The rise of the public participation profession

The public participation landscape is changing in two important ways. One, the emerging professionalisation of participation is shaping *how* participation is conducted in public and private sector planning. Two, this professionalisation is also shaping *who* takes carriage of participatory spaces. Both risks compartmentalising participation, severing the intimate ways of conceiving participation and planning together (see, Frediani and Cociña, 2019). It moves participation towards something that is owned by particular professionals. In other words, participation is *conducted by* those who have been trained or certified under emerging industry standards; these services can then be contracted by governments, project proponents and indeed planners to support planning processes. This shift demands a refinement, or perhaps even a more radical rethink, of participatory planning theory to support critical lines of questioning about who is *doing* participation and why, and importantly *for whom* participation is being conducted. To support this work, we begin our analysis by tracing several changes in the public participation industry.

The rise of a new class of professionalised public participation practitioners needs to be understood in relation to the marketisation of their work. This point is made clearly by Hendriks and Carson (2008), who introduce the language of demand- and supply-side economics to help connect the growth of public participation professionals to the emergence of a public participation marketplace. On the supply side, there is a proliferation of different methods and approaches for facilitating two-way dialogue between citizens and practitioners. Shipley and Utz's (2012) work provide one account of the range of participatory methods and approaches found in planning, highlighting the use of public meetings, citizen juries, focus groups, scenario workshops, visioning exercises, collaborative and consensus-based decision-making and digital engagement approaches (e.g.

social media and computer-based tools). These methods all promise to extend participation to include previously excluded voices and to make even the most complex and technical decisions accessible to a broader range of stakeholders, heightening project proponents' demands for innovative engagement (Lee, 2015). Public and private sector demands for engagement are also shaped by political-economic processes and ideologies that frame public participation as a technical exercise attached to managerial processes of decision-making (Purcell, 2009). Recent discourses around governments' and project proponents' social 'license to operate' provide one example of these demand-side trends.

As the demand for community engagement grows, so too does the demand for a 'new category of expert' (Bherer and Lee, 2019: 196) to design and implement these processes. While some of these public participation specialists work as individual consultants, recent research by Bherer et al. (2021) has tracked the emergence of public participation firms. These firms offer a variety of support services and 'have gradually become recognized as specialists in public debate and who, in turn, subcontract some aspects of the process to smaller firms' (Bherer et al., 2021: 700). Such arrangements have reinforced in some places 'a legitimized organizational model in public participation, that of the delegation of the implementation of a participatory process to a third-party organization' (Bherer et al., 2021: p. 700 italics in original).

The influence of third-party organisations extends beyond these participation firms to include the 'peak industry bodies' (Bice et al., 2019: 296) that are involved in the secondary market of supplying public engagement professionals and would-be professionals with specialised training and networking opportunities. The observed growth in specialised public engagement consultants from the 1990s onwards directly coincides with the formation of professional associations and the increased networking opportunities these associations provide (Bherer & Lee, 2019). But like the large participation firms, these professional bodies play a significant role in consolidating public participation practices and influencing how engagement is delivered (Bherer et al., 2021). This is a structural shift in participatory practice, that ultimately changes the spaces of participation and the power structures encased within them, thus raising interesting theoretical questions about the changing nature of the relationship between urban planning and participation, and how these relationships are understood in planning practice and theory.

These peak industry bodies are also directly implicated in broader efforts to 'professionalise' the practice of participation, as these training packages and programmes not only help would-be engagement consultants break into the field. They also enable those who facilitate participatory processes to establish their participation credentials in ways that align with standards increasingly embraced by a wider group of public engagement practitioners. As Bice et al. (2019) observe, efforts to position public participation practice as a distinct profession are 'generally seen as crucial to the practice's legitimization' (p. 305). This legitimization extends beyond the credentialling of individual practitioners; it is also a vehicle for 'deeper integration of engagement into organizational structures and cultures, including facilitating a greater number of engagement practitioners to enter executive and senior executive leadership roles in the same manner as their engineering, finance and project management counterparts' (Bice et al., 2019: p. 305). As Bherer et al. (2021) observed in their case studies of two government agencies that provide regulatory

oversight over public participation, these agencies further the development of both formal and informal rules, norms and standards. While these agencies ‘rarely internalize public participation in their own organization’ (Bherer et al., 2021: 702), they do change public participation practice, as individual public participation professionals and specialized public participation firms adapted their work to ensure that their clients meet these new standards. In the urban planning context, the corollary set of processes might be the establishment of community engagement units, laying outside of local government’s planning department, and yet playing a significant role in determining its approach and standards for public participation.

As Bherer and Lee (2019) note, the specialised role of community engagement practitioners – and even, by extension, community engagement units – holds open the potential for more innovation processes, better quality control, enhanced legitimacy, increased awareness and promotion of different techniques and the diffusion of these techniques to a wider audience. At the same time, the use of consultants and/or senior public sector leadership positions presents several risks, including a focus on one-off projects rather than systemic change; compromises between the integrity of public engagement and the need to take on projects that ‘pay the bills’; competition between firms and the associated marketisation of certain techniques; and/or an overly standardised or isomorphic approach to engagement as firms work to ensure that their practices are legible and attractive to potential clients (Bherer & Lee, 2019). Even the recent trend towards senior public sector leadership roles that are tasked with articulating the standards and approaches for community engagement within local government does not fully avoid these concerns. While it may remove the risks posed by a project-by-project approach to consultation, it still has the potential to impose an overly standardized approach to community engagement: a shift that would be in direct contrast to planning theory’s emphasis on context and situated judgement (Campbell, 2006)

The emerging body of literature on the public participation industry suggests that these public engagement consultants, and their public engagement counterparts working in various government, non-profit and for-profit agencies, are experiencing a growing sense of discomfort as they reconcile two conflicting narratives. On the one hand, there is the narrative of public engagement as a kind of ethically and politically informed vocation that promotes values around justice, democracy and representation. On the other hand, there is the need to establish their legitimacy as knowledgeable specialists with a distinct skillset who are able to compete for work, if they are consultants, but also to position themselves as a unique category of experts amongst other occupational groups by appealing to an emerging set of industry standards (Bice et al., 2019; Hendriks and Carson, 2008; Lee, 2014, 2015). In this paper, we frame the reported discomfort amongst public participation professionals as a tension between virtue and profession. By ‘virtue’, we mean the tendency to see public participation as a normative goal: a broad good that needs to be promoted and upheld in the name of justice, equity and democracy – all those values that Lee’s (2015) work suggests inspired many public participation practitioners to pursue this line of work. Our use of the term ‘profession’ is meant to capture the rise of this new class of community engagement experts, as well as the underlying processes and practices

that support these practitioners' development and ability to market themselves as possessing a distinct set of skills and professional competencies.

This tension between virtue and profession will ring true for many professional planners as they assert their expertise within a landscape full of related, and often allied, professionals. This is made clear in a paper by [Alterman \(2017\)](#) in which she discusses historical and ongoing efforts to differentiate urban and regional planning from similar areas of practice. It is also likely to feel especially familiar to planners engaged in public participation, as they are often torn between their democratic values and the realities of an increasingly neoliberal planning system ([Sager, 2009](#)). But this tension between virtue and professions is not simply an issue of how individual practitioners, public participation professionals and professional planners alike, experience their work. It is also a question of how the very process of professionalisation shapes and mediates how they understand their work, as well as their inter- and intra-professional relationships. Our understanding of professions, and professionalisation, is shaped by our reading of key tenets of the sociology of the professions, which we turn to in the next section. We then use this literature to structure our analysis of the International Association for Public Participation, one of the largest peak industry bodies, highlighting how it perpetuates, if not exacerbates, this tension between virtue and profession.

Revisiting planning theory's engagement with the sociology of the professions

Although there are some earlier contributions, the 'sociology of the professions' emerged as a distinct sub-field in the 1950s ([Ackroyd, 2016](#)), before falling out of favour amongst sociologists in the 1990s. Research into the sociology of professions was picked up again as a field of study amongst organisational theorists working in business and management schools who placed increased emphasis on how the professions relate to bureaucratic structures and organisations ([Suddaby and Muzio, 2015](#)). Introductory chapters in two volumes on the professions – Ackroyd's chapter in *The Routledge Companion to the Professions and Professionalism* (2016) and Suddaby and Muzio's chapter in *The Oxford Handbook on Professional Service Firms* (2015) – provide succinct overviews of the development of these bodies of literature. Both chapters begin with the earlier sociological literature that sought to identify the defining traits of a profession, with 'prolonged education, specialised knowledge, regulatory associations, developed rules and codes of ethics' ([Ackroyd, 2016](#): p. 14) being some of the traits that were identified in this early body of literature. Early literature also included some discussion of the function professions play in society, with a strong focus on how the professionals work in relation to the state, often (it was theorised) serving a moral or normative purpose and by acting as a stabilising force that upholds broad public interests ([Carr-Saunders and Wilson, 1964](#); see also [Goode, 1969](#); [Parsons, 1939](#)).

The idea that a profession is defined by its commitment to the public interest is one way that the sociology of the professions connects to planning theory. There is a longstanding body of literature on the public interest in planning ([Alexander, 2002](#); [Campbell and Marshall, 2000](#); [Chettiparamb, 2016](#); [Howe, 1992](#); [Moroni, 2004](#)). Marcuse's (1976)

writing on planning ethics, professionalisation and the public interest explicitly references some of the traits and functional theories described by Ackroyd. [Alterman's \(2017\)](#) more recent paper provides another example of how these functional and trait-based theories of the professions have influenced how planning scholars think about their field. She turns to [Glazer's \(1974\)](#) and [Schön's \(1984\)](#) writing on the 'minor professions' to frame her analysis, arguing that planning has not yet articulated the strong professional identity needed to differentiate itself from other allied fields. However, planning scholarship has not fully engaged with more critical strands of the sociology of the professions, with a few exceptions. For instance, writing in the early 1990s when the collaborative turn was starting to claim significant territory in planning, [Howe \(1992\)](#) looked to the literature on the sociology of the professions to consider how the autonomy of the planner, and their capacity to exercise professional discretion, was changing. Campbell and Marshall's paper ([2005](#)) continued in a similar vein by examining how the planning profession in the UK is evolving in response to increased professional competition and significant statutory changes, leading them to question the role of planners. In this paper, we call for a return to this sociological literature to consider how the rise of the participatory practitioner is further shaping how we might understand professionalism in planning, and by extension the professionalisation of participatory practice.

More specifically, we see great benefit in engaging more directly with the 'post-functional' theories of the professions ([Fournier, 1999: 282](#)), which first emerged in the 1970s. By calling attention to the power structures that are produced and reproduced through professionalisation and by raising questions about whose interests the professions serve, these conceptualizations of the drivers and dynamics of professionalisation help frame new lines of critical inquiry about professionalised public participation practitioners and their relationship to the theory and practice of participatory planning. As the name implies, the post-functional theories marked a distinct turn away from the idea that the professions and professionalisation are simply about the articulation and consolidation of a particular form of expertise; they are equally about regulation and control both within and between the professions. Initially, these theories focused on the political economy of the professions, with a focus on how the professions wield power and intervene in labour markets through their ability to control entry with various certification and licensing efforts ([Johnson, 1972; Larson, 1977](#)). Within this literature, there have also been ethnographic studies that speak to conflict and competition – both within any one individual profession and with other occupational groups ([Ackroyd, 2016](#)). Professions, according to these Marxist-inspired theories, are a mechanism that allows groups of organised practitioners to control their clients, members and broader institutional environments. Although planning scholarship has also addressed questions of social control, these works have focussed on the control that the profession exerts on the lives of citizens, or on how spaces and people are made governable through planning (see, [Huxley, 2018; Yiftachel, 1998](#)), rather than on the controls that exist within and upon the members of the profession itself.

The sociology of the professions has much to contribute to these discussions; as the post-functional theories of the professions continued to evolve, more attention has been paid to the mechanisms through which the professions exert control. Discourse is now

understood to be one of the primary ways that professionals ‘have sought to negotiate their way of looking at things and to persuade others of its validity’ (Ackroyd, 2016: 19). In one representative example of this sub-body of literature, Fournier describes professionalisation as a discipline through which practitioners ‘inscribe themselves (their expertise and practice) within a chain establishing connections between clients, truth, competence and conduct of the practitioner; this chain is itself inscribed within the network of liberal government’ (1999: 287–288). The various accountability measures used by the professions (certification, standards of competence, etc) become the disciplinary logic through which practitioners establish their legitimacy, or become ‘accepted into the club’, but also the mechanisms through which practitioners regulate their own behaviour and that of the other practitioners who are already in or seeking to gain access to that same ‘club’.

Professionalisation is a mechanism through which its practitioners establish their legitimacy in an expanding marketplace. Professionalisation also recognises the growing diversity of actors in the participatory space, extending well beyond planning and planners. This diversity signals a pluralisation of actors that requires that their respective practices be governed or disciplined in a way that is consistent with, and sets the foundations for, what could be deemed ‘good practice’. But, as Fournier (1999) cautions, the survival and autonomy of these public participation professionals as a distinct category of experts are often dependent on the establishment of a disciplinary logic through which practitioners articulate shared competence and areas of authority, while also regulating their own patterns of behaviour:

the professions have to inscribe their practice and expertise in order to establish and maintain their place in liberal government. This disciplinary logic operates through forging connections between various actors (e.g., the state, the client, the sovereign customer), criteria of legitimacy (e.g., truth, efficiency, public good), professional competence and personal conduct (Fournier, 1999: 288).

Fournier’s observations about the disciplinary logic that exists in other professions demand that scholars of the rising public participation industry pay closer attention to the disciplinary logic expressed through ideas of ‘best practice’. Such logics frame the mandate of some of the professionalised bodies that have emerged to support this new class of public participation practitioners. ‘Best practices’, Fournier’s work would suggest, are a disciplining instrument that is used to establish buy-in into existing training programmes and to articulate examples of ‘success in the field’, which not only attracts aspiring participatory practitioners but also local and state governments who can later boast about their participatory credentials and commitment to delivering best practice engagement. As Fournier (1999) also notes, these disciplinary logics are often intimately connected to wider, macro-level shifts, including towards neoliberal modes of governance.

Planning theory has engaged with the sociology of the professions, but a contemporary reading is needed to reflect the evolving nature of public participation and its changing relationship with planning practice. There is value in interrogating these changes and

assessing how the presence of industry bodies, as well as how a possible ‘turn’ towards professionalisation of participation, is changing the way planning is practised. In the section that follows, we consider one industry body – the IAP2 – and its positionality as a professional organisation. Through this assessment, we aim to open lines of inquiry about how planners relate to these new professionalised spaces of community engagement.

A critical analysis of professionalised participation: The case of the International Association for Public Participation

To better illustrate the relevance of the sociology of the professions to a critical interrogation of the professionalisation of public participation, we provide a preliminary analysis of the International Association for Public Participation or IAP2 (a prominent example of the peak industry bodies discussed earlier). Our goal here is not to provide a complete presentation of original research data, as our work in this area is ongoing. Rather we rely primarily on secondary sources, including web-based material and some academic research on IAP2 from within public administration and occasionally planning, to illustrate the pathways through which public participation is professionalising.

IAP2 was established in 1990 with a mandate ‘to promote and improve the practice of public participation’ (IAP2, n.d.-c: para 1). Using the discourse of ‘best practice’, it offers a platform or rather a professional arena for members to share ideas and stories through an annual international conference and regional organizations (IAP2, n.d.-c) that include Australasia, Canada, Indonesia, Latin America, Southern Africa and the US. The widely available IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation was developed as one of the mechanisms for achieving these goals. The Spectrum, as it is often referred to, is an obvious riff on Arnstein’s (1969) Ladder of Citizen Participation in that it outlines different levels of community engagement ranging from ‘inform’ to ‘empower’. It was intended to help practitioners select a ‘level of participation that defines the public’s role in any public participation process’ (IAP2, n.d.-a). The Spectrum has been used to guide planning practice (Quick and Bryson, 2016) and to direct the evaluation of community engagement (see, for instance Brown and Chin, 2013; Hall et al., 2019)).

In addition to the Spectrum, IAP2 has also developed its own values statement, as well as a Code of Ethics. IAP2’s seven Core Values, which are also freely available on its website, ‘define the expectations and aspiration of the public participation process’ (IAP2 n.d.-c: 2). The Core Values are grounded in many of the virtues of public participation discussed earlier, emphasizing the fundamental belief that the form of participation ought to be identifiable along the Spectrum. It also stresses the importance of engaging citizens in ways that they deem appropriate, as well as empowering them with information and the assurance that their involvement will shape the decision. The Code of Ethics takes these core values and translates them into a series of principles that public participation practitioners have the responsibility to uphold.

IAP2’s Spectrum of Public Participation, Core Values and Code of Ethics, which it collectively refers to as the ‘3 Pillars of Public Participation’, do significant work in terms of furthering the emergence of a distinct class of public participation professionals. The grey literature on IAP2’s pillars suggests that they both reflect the interests of stakeholders

and establish a ‘foundation’ (IAP2, n.d.-a: 1) from which new industry standards for public participation can emerge. One of IAP2 Australasia’s documents declares: ‘The Core Values are commonly accepted as informing best practice engagement’ (IAP2 Australasia, 2015: 10). Further, practitioners can look to IAP2 ‘to ensure consistency in quality and support... It also allows any process to be audited against a defined standard for simpler evaluation and quality assurance’ (IAP2, 2015, p. 2). Understanding how such standards and discourses impact practice requires further research. However, one example was found in South Australia, where the IAP2 pillars are described as being ‘widely used by government in planning and reporting on public consultation initiatives’ (Davis and Andrew, 2017, no page number) and were used to develop and evaluate public participation. In other contexts, IAP2 has been deemed an ‘international standard’ for community engagement, particularly amongst Canadian municipalities (Goodman et al., 2020). While it is not yet clear to us how active IAP2 is in terms of lobbying local governments to adopt their ‘pillars’ of participation, our own research has revealed that these documents are widely used in Canada and Australia. The Spectrum of Public Participation, Core Values and Code of Ethics appear in municipal documents with little to no adaptation to the local context and are accompanied with similar references to IAP2 materials being the ‘international gold standard’. Our key informant interviews suggest this discursive strategy is part of a broader effort to bring credibility and legitimacy to the work public participation professionals in a setting that is dominated by engineers and other professions with a clear and immediately recognizable knowledge-base.

IAP2’s pillars are also the backbone on which its own training programmes have been developed. The most common programme is the ‘Foundations of Public Participation’ course, which was developed by IAP2 International and includes a module on planning and designing community engagement as well as a module on the public participation techniques and tools (IAP2, n.d.-b). IAP2 Australasia has developed its own approach with the introduction of the ‘Certificate in Engagement’, which also draws heavily on the IAP2 Spectrum (IAP2 Australasia, n.d.). In Canada and the US, practitioners that have taken this ‘Foundations’ course can then pursue two levels of professional designation: a Certified Public Participation Practitioner (CP3) and a Master Certified Public Participation Practitioner (MCP3). These training and certification schemes are also having a noticeable impact on municipal governance in the countries where we work. For example, the City of Vancouver supported one of its staff members to become an IAP2 trainer and offer IAP2 foundations training to interested municipal staff. Other Canadian municipalities have issued job postings and Requests for Proposals that require IAP2 training for anyone involved in public participation (see, e.g. City of Edmonton, 2019; City of Red Deer, n.d.; Town of Okotoks, 2017). In Australia, the prominence of the IAP2 framework is evident at the scale of local government where it is embraced to guide practice and supported by recent amendments to the local government act to include deliberative engagement activity, as well as echoed in 2015 and 2017 reports by the state auditor general which sought to establish standards for public participation (Victorian Auditor General’s Office, 2015, 2017). The diffusion of IAP2 material across local and municipal government planning practice is serving to attach the general work of public participation to the approach used by one increasingly influential professional body, in this case IAP2.

The sociology of professions helps render visible the ways in which IAP2 has been able to use its pillars, and associated training programmes, to gain traction as a legitimate entity in the public participation space. For example, IAP2's efforts to promote and improve participation can easily be recognized as a commitment to the public interest, which the functional theories of the professions say is a defining feature. However, this public interest is focused specifically on the quality of participation and, arguably, how it may extend the democratic purchase of planning. In other words, the focus is on ensuring a 'good' process, but there is little connection to whether this good process leads also to 'good' planning outcomes: a longstanding tension in planning theory (see [Fainstein, 2005](#)). The discourses of 'best practice', 'quality assurance' and 'certified' practice help bind practitioners together by a common commitment to serve and facilitate a public interest that is process focussed, further fragmenting planning and fuelling disconnection between the process and outcomes.

While the role that IAP2, and organisations like it, play in terms furthering this disconnect between process and outcome in participatory planning theory is of critical importance, our interests in this paper lie in the mechanisms through which these peak industry bodies assert their distinctiveness as a profession. The dynamics and potential costs of establishing this shared sense of identity and expertise amongst the members of any one professional body – and then potentially defending them against others – are discussed in the sociology of the professions. Returning to the work of [Fournier \(1999\)](#), the establishment of the public participation professional as a distinct category requires some level of boundary-setting or (to put it in a more critical light) disciplining the practice by establishing what is deemed 'good', 'the best' and 'the standard', which is also a way of establishing what counts as quality participation. The IAP2 pillars along with the discourses used to describe them, therefore, need to be understood as a key part of these disciplining efforts, but membership and training are also significant. Establishing a membership is, by design, a process of drawing the boundaries of who is in and who is not. This access affords an organization like IAP2 and its members the opportunity to collectively augment their authority and legitimacy by learning and sharing resources in a curated space. Discourse, membership and training all allow an organization like IAP2 to assert that it, and not some other industry body, provides the stabilising force and common normative purpose that functional theories posit as being central to professionalisation.

As the literature on the sociology of the professions posits, professionalisation is also about conflict and power, with direct implications for the political economy that contextualises planning. The uptake of IAP2 training and certificates by municipal and local government actors involved in public engagement in Canada and Australia reveals a particular form of power that can be achieved through professionalisation. Although this wielding of power is not necessarily intentional or malicious, IAP2 does have the potential to intervene in labour markets in ways that serve the public participation practitioner through cultivating a jobs-focussed marketplace where such services can be employed. By creating a marketplace, the practices of participation and the skills, knowledges and experiences that sit behind it are commercialised and paid for, in some instances, as consultancy fees. The power of the profession is also wielded in and around who gains access to that marketplace, and who can provide such services. Here IAP2 membership,

training or certification can help some gain greater access to opportunities in participatory practices while closing the door to others who may be deemed 'un(der)qualified' to perform the work. The requirement, described earlier, for IAP2-trained practitioners for municipal jobs and Request for Proposals suggest that these kinds of interventions are not simply speculative; the market for public participation professionals is already change in some contexts. These shifts are raising critical questions for planning, including what the tensions are between professionalisation of participation and the virtues that have come to characterise planning, and can these tensions ever be reconciled. Furthermore, what is the role of the planner *in* participation, and what opportunities lie ahead for planning *with* participation remain important questions for the discipline.

This brief examination of IAP2 shows an intentional effort to build presence in the public participation space, by discursively describing a landscape of practice in need of standards, values and networks. Professionalisation has become a way of characterising public participation as a distinct field positioning it as something situated outside of the skillset of those typically possessed by planners. This distinction is mobilised through the creation of membership and training programmes which in turn reinforce the essence of an existing professionalised practice.

Towards a theory of professionalised participatory planning

At this point, it is worth summarising our arguments and observations thus far. We began by tracing significant changes to participatory planning in theory, noting how it can no longer be understood as solely the domain of well-intentioned planning practitioners, committed to the virtues of inclusivity, justice and equity and whose work is sensitively situated within a local context. Participatory planning is also an industry in which public participation practitioners have emerged as a new category of experts in the contexts in which we write from that is solidifying its place in an ever-expanding marketplace by professionalising its work. IAP2 is one of several bodies that have emerged in Canada and Australia that seems to be aiding in this professionalisation and we have used the sociology of the professions to raise a more critical line of inquiry and the dynamics and potential costs of its work. The cultivation of standards that are expressed through notions of 'best practice' and supported by training programmes and certificates are a means for creating and enforcing the boundaries of acceptable participatory practice. They have also contributed to the emergence of public participation practitioners in these two western neoliberal contexts that are distinct from, though may also overlap with the work of professional planners. This differentiation of professional roles and responsibilities risk transforming public participation into a practice contained within a planning project, as opposed to being part of the act of planning itself. Yet, the risks posed by the professionalisation of public participation are not well accounted for in planning scholarship.

Planning theory and practice have long been framed by an assumption that it is planners who will take carriage of public participation. Scholarship from the 1980s on how planning intersects with the field of alternative dispute resolution and predominantly grounded in western contexts did suggest that allied professionals (mediators, etc) might support participatory planning efforts (Susskind and Ozawa, 1984). But, overall, there is

still a sense that the virtues of participation, such as those described in planning theory by American and British planning theorists [Forester \(1999\)](#), [Healey \(1997\)](#) and [Innes \(1995\)](#), will be enacted by planners through their own reflective practices. As discussed above, there is a whole new category of actors that are seen to possess the skills of designing, delivering and facilitating public participation. Some of these actors are embedded in government departments, while others work as private consultants. Both are often associated with the wider institutional apparatus of planning, while not necessarily being trained themselves in planning. Moreover, these practitioners are not necessarily guided by professional planning bodies, but increasingly by their own professional organisations like IAP2. These bodies shift the virtues of the practice to those that are prescribed through the rhetoric of ‘best practice’, the articulation of ‘core values’ and other ‘standard’-setting efforts.

To understand these shifts and the risks to planning, more attention needs to be paid to the mechanisms through which these public participation practitioners and their professional bodies shape the formal and informal structures of public participation. As such, we endeavoured to problematise these mechanisms and in doing so extend the ways participation is conceptualised in planning theory. Theorisation is required to understand the composite parts that bring public participation practitioners and professional bodies together in service to planning. [Healey’s \(1999, 2007\)](#) efforts to examine the institutional dimensions of planning practice, including how individual practitioners are hooked into larger apparatuses of governance, provide some of the conceptual tools needed to interrogate the structures of participatory planning. This literature is also instrumental in assessing the interaction between public participation and planning and the opportunities the former had to influence the latter. An institutional analysis of this kind produced insights into the way participation could influence and even shape the culture and institutions through which planning is conducted. While attention has been paid to the influence of various citizen groups, non-government organizations and quasi-government bodies ([Healey, 1998](#)), the influence of professional bodies do not appear in institutional approaches to planning theory. This is potentially problematic as it misses how the presence of public participation practitioners, whose work is often detached from planning in favour of connections to these new professional bodies, may further inhibit citizens’ and even planners’ capacity to shape the institutions of planning through their participatory efforts; this requires the attention of planning theory.

The professionalisation of participation is reflective of a post-political planning condition. Expressed in many ways, this condition includes the concealment of the political through managerial urban governance and technocratic processes and the use of ‘empty signifiers’ (e.g. liveability and sustainability) in policy making ([Brown, 2016](#); [Swyngedouw, 2021](#)). Like institutional approaches to planning theory, these concepts require interrogation for the risks they may pose within the context of the professionalisation of participation. More specifically, such concepts help situate these professional bodies’ efforts to prescribe and self-regulate industry standards; thus, extending the post-political condition of planning to that of participation where the latter possesses its own structure resulting in the introduction of new potential limits and constraints around what counts. What the presence of empty signifiers do to participation

as a practice and set of processes is that it can create a buffer from scrutiny making it potentially difficult for planners (and certainly communities) to contest the terms upon which participation is practiced (by planners) and experienced (by communities), including who is setting those terms and who is being served. Moreover, the concerns raised within this literature about the hegemonic power of communicative planning and other traditions of participation (see [Purcell, 2009](#)) help us recognise these new standards and ‘best practices’ as a kind of potential ‘gatekeeping’ of how participation is practiced, where it is practiced and on who’s terms; these are political questions that claims of ‘best practice’ can depoliticise. Considering the conditions that create a post-political landscape in planning and we argue, in participation, may, therefore, help us to see the disciplining power of professionalising participation, more generally.

Still, planning theory does not fully consider the different ways the professionalisation of participation may be changing how participation is performed in planning and who or what is setting the terms. There is also a gap in understanding what impacts the rise of a professional participation industry may be having on planning’s virtue, including what values gain prominence in planning through participation, who is making such decisions and on what grounds those decisions are made. Another related concern is how such virtues are consolidated and bound to a new professional body. With the presence of an industry body like IAP2, there is a need to critically assess the ways in which new limits may be imposed on planning and the power wielded by certification processes as acquired through the professionalising process. The concern is that those limits – whatever they might be – are imposed in a way that changes the capacity to be responsive to local conditions and to evolve as community expectations about their participation change.

The sociology of the professions, when set in conversation with existing theories of participatory planning, helps us address the aforementioned gaps in planning theory, by supporting a deeper analysis of how the people who do the work of designing and facilitating public engagement processes have come together to define – but also potentially to enforce – the parameters of their practice. This is not a new body of literature for planning scholars as it has been used to help define the nature and characteristics of planning *as a profession*. We see the sociology of the professions as equally useful in terms of interrogating planning’s relationship to *other* professions – including the nascent and yet increasingly influential profession of public participation practitioners. The sociology of the professions helps name and theorise this ‘new category of expert’ ([Bherer and Lee, 2019](#): 196) as a profession by asking us to pay attention to how it positions itself vis-à-vis the public interest, as well as how professionalisation asserts the boundaries of acceptable participatory practice through distinct training programmes and codes of ethical practice. Given that the sociology of the professions has evolved beyond these early trait and functional accounts of the professions, we conclude that planning theory’s engagement with this literature must evolve too. We identify two potentially fruitful areas for incorporating more critical lines of questions drawn from the sociology of the professions into the theorisation of participatory planning.

One, the conflict and competition approach to theorising the professions (as articulated by [Ackroyd, 2016](#), but found in the work of [Johnson, 1972](#); [Larson, 1977](#)) provides a way of thinking about how planners interact with these new public participation professionals.

There is potential for competition between planners and the participation practitioners around the different assertions of what is good participation. On some level, agonism between the two kinds of practitioners would be useful in that it has the potential to generate new ideas and ways of thinking about participation in planning. There could be the introduction of a kind of practice-level accountability in a way that supports the questioning of 'best practice'. There is also a potential for mutually supportive allied practitioners to commit to both planning and participation in a way that cultivates a reflective space and practice-level accountability of both the process and what the process produces by reviewing how standards are being set, and what outcomes are being delivered. However, in neoliberal planning contexts where privatisation is met with outsourcing of expertise, there is a risk that planners will simply contract out participation in a way that results in a loss of such skills within planning, and perhaps further detach planners from the communities they are seeking to serve. This kind of fragmentation risks reproducing planning's post-political condition whereby the political within planning, which often gains expression outside of formal participatory spaces as forms of resistance, is something that occurs 'over there' and certainly to be 'managed out' and 'controlled'. Fragmentation is particularly problematic, not only for who is setting the terms and standards for participation, but for the way it can further marginalise communities affected by planning from being active agents in setting these terms and in determining outcomes, especially when the desired outcome by communities is substantially different to what they are being asked to consider. Externalising participation is potentially problematic if the participation practitioners are consultants who are in service to their clients. Indeed, in parliamentary democracies planners are in service to political mandates, but their work is embedded within a public service that is tasked with servicing the public interest by definition. The shifts in participation reflect a broader structural phenomenon that has limited planner's agency to technical and managerial practices. The relational, political and community-embeddedness of previous traditions of planning (advocacy planning) is diminished further. While certainly planners must be held to account for poorly serving community interests in the past, and romanticising past practices is unproductive in efforts to strive for greater justice in cities. Yet, there is a need to acknowledge how planning may be *further losing* its democratic purchase – a death by a thousand cuts – and if planning theorists and practitioner are not careful the uncritical rise of a participation industry may introduce new negative consequences.

Two, Fournier's (1999) more discursive approach to theorising the professions provides some of the language and tools for interrogating not just the tensions and struggles within the peak industry bodies, like IAP2, but also how they are situated within a chain of neoliberal governance that continues to predominate in places like Canadian and Australian cities. Bringing the sociology of the professions into conversation with the critical threads in planning theory can help expose the power relationships that emerge out of the professionalisation of participation. Once the domain of planners to engage with their local communities, the rise of the participation industry is occurring within a context of a new political economy where participation is not only professionalised; it is also being commercialised.

As discussed above, this kind of analysis complements, but also substantially extends existing planning theory. It provides a way of accounting for the influence of professional bodies and how these bodies can, in turn, shape the governance of both private and public sector participatory planning initiatives. For instance, while the establishment of a participation industry under conditions of neoliberalism is something that existing planning theories can observe through the lens of post-politics, the fragmentation caused by the introduction of a new actor (participation practitioners) raises new questions around who is doing participatory planning. Such questions cannot be easily seen or assessed through either an institutional or post-political lens. The sociology of the professions helps us to see the rise of a labour market for public participation, and how it is expanding. It allows further examination of the competition and community-level demand within this market, and how power may be shifting further away from planners doing planning, towards participation practitioners who are possessing more power to control their 'clients' needs. Perhaps, more importantly, the sociology of the professions provides a way of thinking about how practitioners become entrenched in the regulation of their field of practice through discursive devices.

When these insights from the sociology of the professions are incorporated into existing planning theory, a new way of understanding participatory planning begins to emerge. While these professional bodies are very much grounded in the virtues of participatory practice, they also set in place a rigidity around what counts as public participation. This rigidity gets reproduced through the power of discourse such that broad virtues of participation are affixed to an industry body that also has clear interests in solidifying its legitimacy and authority in the public participation marketplace. This emergent theory of professionalised participatory planning is not just about the evolution of planning and the changing of planning cultures as posited by Healey (1997); it is also about the capacity for participation to continuously evolve in response to new challenges and expectations. The concern we have explored in this paper is this capacity for change may be quite seriously curtailed by the professional bodies involved in the emergent public participation industry.

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