The tree of participation: a new model for inclusive decision-making

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Abstract   Community development often involves organizing participatory decision-making processes. The challenge is for this to be meaningful. Participatory decision-making has the potential to increase the transparency, accountability, equity and efficiency with which public administration serves the least privileged in society. However, in practice, it often fails to bring about these outcomes. A number of academics and practitioners have, therefore, theorized how participatory decision-making processes can better empower marginalized groups. By critically reviewing this body of work and empirically grounding the debate in recent practice, we aimed to develop a theoretically rigorous, easily applicable and holistic model of an inclusive participatory decision-making process that can work across a range of contexts. The empirical strand included surveying public engagement practitioners and participants about the participatory events they had organized or attended. These empirical findings were combined with insights from the theoretical literature to devise a new conceptual model of emancipatory, inclusive and empowering participatory decision-making – the 'Tree of Participation'. The model can be useful to both organizers of participatory processes, as a check for empowering and inclusive practice, and to disadvantaged groups, as a set of expectations and demands when engaging in public decision-making.

Introduction

The idea that people should be able to influence the decisions that affect their lives is widely supported from all sides of the political spectrum

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(see UNECE, 2001; Dean, 2017) and is a fundamental tenet of community development. The challenge is to be able to create spaces for both voice and influence and to help provide the necessary support (Cornwall, 2008). Citizens are also sometimes keen to be more involved in decision-making regarding planning and management on matters that directly impact them. For example, Extinction Rebellion is currently advocating Citizens' Assemblies as a form of deliberative democracy to address the challenge of climate change (Extinction Rebellion, 2019). However, participatory decision-making processes are often considered to be inadequate in practice, with concerns ranging from the manipulation of individuals and tokenistic use of participation to legitimize decisions, to broader critiques that society does not currently equip people with the necessary information or equality required to participate in effective discourse (e.g. Mansbridge, 1990; Young, 1990; Benhabib, 1992; Fraser, 1992; Ocloo and Matthews, 2016).

Authentic and effective participation clearly depends on the quality of the process and there has consequently been significant academic and practitioner attention to this over decades (e.g. Arnstein, 1969; Dryzek, 1990; Young, 2002; Cornwall, 2008; Eversole, 2012). To improve participatory processes, several theoretical models of participation have been developed, as will be discussed.

Some analysts have also argued that the type of participatory process must respond to the context (e.g. Kochskämper *et al.*, 2017; Plummer *et al.*, 2017). Evidence indicates that context will strongly impact on the participatory process, for example, in terms of (i) the objectives of the decision-making process, (ii) social-cultural factors, (iii) political-governance factors, (iv) power dynamics, (v) historical context, (vi) spatial context and (vii) temporal context. These are points made across the literature (e.g. Gurney *et al.*, 2016; Baker and Chapin III, 2018; Reed, Bryce and Machen, 2018), distilled here into these seven categories and reflected in our 'Tree of Participation' (ToP) model. There is not the space to elaborate on all here but, for example, demographic factors have been shown to influence the levels of engagement from publics and stakeholders along lines of wealth (e.g. Agrawal and Gupta, 2005), gender (e.g. Zuhair and Kurian, 2016) and education (e.g. Chen *et al.*, 2013), among other factors.

It is important to also consider temporal issues. Contexts change, often rapidly and unpredictably, and this can have a significant bearing on how participation plays out. Yet, limited attention has been paid to temporal factors and their dynamics in the analysis and design of participation.

In view of the plethora of models, their contradictory nature and their tendency to overlook context, as former community development workers and participation organizers, the authors were motivated to develop a new participatory decision-making model that is theoretically rigorous, easily applicable and that can work across a range of contexts. Rooted in an

aspiration for inclusion and emancipation, this model builds on the particular strengths of each of the key participation models reviewed below and resolves some tensions between them. The model developed – the ToP – can be used by those who engage in participatory decision-making processes, whether as organizers or as stakeholders, in planning, policy development and service design across a range of issues. It can be utilized as an organizer's guide to empowering and inclusive practice and as a stakeholder's set of expectations and demands. If taken up in this way, it is hoped that this model can reduce the likelihood of tokenistic or manipulative engagement and achieve better outcomes for the least powerful.

Method

To develop the model, the methodology integrated both theoretical and practical expertise on inclusive public participation in decision-making. A narrative literature review was chosen over systematic methods that tend to focus on more narrowly focused questions. Narrative reviews are scholarly summaries that combine interpretation and critique (Petticrew *et al.*, 2013; Greenhalgh, Thorne and Malterud, 2018). They require authentic representation of the underpinning evidence to the argument and an explanation of how this evidence has been drawn upon and drawn together to inform conclusions (Greenhalgh, Thorne and Malterud, 2018). This process provided the level of interpretation and critique necessary to deepen the understanding of what works in participation.

Sources included the Scopus and Web of Science databases (citation indexes, general searches and subject specific searches), reference lists, library searches, grey literature and internet search engines (Google, Google Scholar). Papers and texts were included from 1950, allowing a seventy-year timespan. Key elements important for empowering participatory decision-making and idealized models were, thereby, identified within a number of different disciplinary and application contexts.

The relevant factors for inclusive participation that were identified in the narrative review formed the basis of the questions for an online survey. The survey was called 'Participation – What Works?'. It was designed to elicit knowledge from those with experience in engaging with publics and stakeholders. The aim was to identify the factors leading to the empowerment or disempowerment of participants in processes they had direct experience of. The online survey was made available online for two weeks in October 2018. It was announced via the UK National Co-ordinating Centre on Public Engagement; the training company, Fast Track Impact; and Voscur, a voluntary sector infrastructure organization, using their newsletters and online noticeboards. A total of seventy-five individuals completed the survey, most on behalf of the organizations they work or volunteer for.

Of these, fifty were answering as organizers of participatory processes and twenty-five as participants. All the organizations were based in the United Kingdom.

Those who took up the invitation were asked, via the short survey, about their experiences in relation to participation. The seventy-five survey respondents were asked to consider a participatory event that they had organized or taken part in. These respondents opted to focus on their engagement with public decision-making events linked to a range of public administration issues, including health services, development planning, gender, science, democracy, recruitment, refugee services, legal services, land use, care services, parks and environmental services.

The survey covered the purpose of the participation process; the timescale; the spatial scale; its perceived level of success; the presence of factors theorized as important for an effective and inclusive participatory decision-making process; and the extent to which adaptations were made to include marginalized groups. There were ten key questions – most were multiple choice (e.g. type of participation event, timescale and spatial scale). Some required rating, on a scale from one to five, the extent to which specific factors were present in the participatory process they were considering, such as 'transparency of process' (see Table 1 for a full list). There were also open spaces available to add further qualitative information. The concepts used were explained or expanded upon in the survey, for example, 'The ability to deliberate' was further elaborated as 'i.e. to share perspectives freely with adequate information to do so', as described in Table 1. This table also indicates where each factor may be most relevant in the temporal process – before, during or after.

The online survey participants were also asked to consider various factors relating to context. For example, they were asked:

'Which, if any, particular groups were targeted for the process? (choose all relevant – Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic; low-income; women, disabled people, LGBTQIA+ and other marginalized or oppressed groups)'.

The participants were also asked whether they had adapted the process to take into account the different contexts.

The survey was summarized using basic frequency statistics together with grounded theory analysis for the qualitative data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2006). The narrative literature review and the online survey material were then integrated to develop the ToP model. This involved identifying key factors required for inclusive engagement from the narrative review and the survey and building into the model. The findings from these two streams of the study will be elaborated in the following sections before further discussing the development and application of the ToP model.

Table 1 Theorized factors rated in survey and main phase of process where important

Factor	Phase
A safe space that fosters trust Inclusion of marginalized voices/perspectives Accessibility to all, systematically identifying and overcoming barriers to engagement, such as cost, language and cultural barriers Access to the resources and other means necessary to actively participate	PRE and DURING
Equal power for all participants within the process The ability to deliberate, that is, to share perspectives freely with adequate information to do so	DURING
Accountability, during and post-process, ensuring that responsibility is taken for decisions and they are faithfully implemented Feedback loops that keep people informed about how their knowledge is being used	DURING and POST
Equal recognition of all types of knowledge from local, lay, informal, implicit, contextual 'know-how' to scientific, expert, formal, explicit, universal 'know-why' Authenticity, that is, honest and open communication Transparency of process, that is, occurring in an open way without secrets Freedom (from fear)	ALL

Key models of participatory decision-making

The narrative literature review revealed numerous relevant studies and ideas regarding inclusive participatory decision-making. They are broadly represented by the following eight key theories, presented here in the order of their temporal appearance in the literature. Though there are a number of other theories and models, such as the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum (IAPP, 2007), the theories below have been selected as being the most fundamental and influential over time.

Arnstein's ladder

Sherry Arnstein's (1969) model of participation focuses on the manipulations that can be inherent in participatory decision-making processes. Her work is normative and radical, providing a critique that centres on the extent to which power is devolved to participants. She describes a ladder of participation with steps from 'non-participation' aiming to 'educate' or 'cure' participants at the bottom; through 'tokenism' that allows communication but not influence; to increasing degrees of decision-making power up to full managerial control at the top of the ladder. 'Consultation', which often seems to be considered the gold standard of participation by planners and governments in general is also criticized by Arnstein.

Consultation offers no assurance that citizen opinions will be taken into account since powerholders reserve the right to judge the legitimacy or feasibility of the advice given. At this stage, participation is measured by how many people come to meetings or answer a questionnaire. Higher up the ladder, at the level of partnership, power has been redistributed between citizens and elites and decision-making is shared. However, this requires an organized power-base in the community and, ideally, financial resources for the community to pay their own technicians, lawyers and community organizers. 'Citizen control' is the highest rung and occurs when participants or residents can be in full charge of the policy, programmes and management which affect their lives. Other participation models have built on Arnstein's work, such as Shier's (2001) 'Pathways to Participation' for children and youth. Arnstein's model is useful in highlighting all that can be dysfunctional in participatory decision-making and in linking the interpersonal and organizational barriers to participation with community, resourcing and governance issues. However, the model has been critiqued for being value-laden (e.g. Dean, 2017) and conflating the description of participation (typology) with explanations about what works (theory) (e.g. Reed *et al.*, 2018).

Citizen assessments
A number of studies have looked at citizens' assessments of legal and other decision-making procedures in terms of their fairness. Thibaut and Walker (1975) found that people considered procedures to be fair to the extent that they perceived they had control over the decision-making process and outcome. Later, Leventhal (1980) found that perceptions of procedural fairness were enhanced by the presence of consistent procedures; lack of bias, self-interest or prejudice; access to accurate and reliable information; the ability to modify and reverse decisions that contain errors or oversights; and the extent to which the opinions and values of those affected by the decisions are represented. Pops and Pavlak's (1991) model of fair decision-making processes included equality of access to the process, neutrality, transparency, efficiency and right to appeal. Bies and Moag (1986) focused on interpersonal aspects, such as whether decision makers are truthful, treat people with respect, refrain from improper questions and justify decision outcomes.

Deliberative democracy
In ideal circumstances, 'deliberative democracy', sometimes also known as 'discursive democracy', would fit into the top rungs of Arnstein's ladder as a form of citizen power. The term refers to collective decision-making based on inclusive public discussions (Dryzek, 1990; Cohen, 1989). Deliberative

democracy asserts that democracy is realized through the experience of deliberation which furthers understanding and self-development. Dryzek (1990) argues that deliberative communication should be free of domination, strategizing and self-deception and that all actors should be fully capable of making and questioning arguments. Similarly, Habermas's (1984) 'ideal speech situation' asserts that, for procedures to be considered fair, there should be no restrictions, either inner (e.g. prejudices) or outer (e.g. ideologies, lack of time and insufficient knowledge), determining the outcome of the discourse. Only the force of better argument would determine the outcome (Habermas, 1984). Therefore, language should be mutually understood and there must be sincerity, freedom and right of speech, a right to question and give answers, and accountability.

There are power issues within deliberation that must be acknowledged. Benhabib (1992) noted, for example, that the concerns of non-dominant groups, such as women, are often deemed inappropriate for public discussion. In this way, ' . . . deliberation can serve as a mask for domination' (Fraser, 1992, p. 119). Especially where there are low levels of participation, participatory models can reinforce the existing inequalities between groups of citizens. Therefore, deliberative democracy usually involves extensive outreach to include marginalized groups. In particular, Young (2002), argues for 'inclusive deliberative democracy' and highlights that 'inclusive' reflects, not just presence, but voice. Other authors have gone beyond the requirement for recognition of 'voice' to recognition of 'knowledge' (e.g. Krumer-Nevo, 2009; Eversole, 2012). For example, Krumer-Nevo (2009), focusing on the extent to which people in poverty can influence debates and policy on poverty, argues that their perspectives must be recognized as valid 'knowledge'. It is not just about having the space to say things but also that what is said is taken seriously and considered to be of high value. There are many examples of deliberative democracy in action, particularly from the Global South, such as participatory planning in informal settlements in Uganda (Watson and Siame, 2018) and co-produced housing in Thailand (Boonyabancha and Kerr, 2018).

Participatory politics
Participatory politics (parpolity) draws on deliberative democracy but has practical ideas about how decision-making should be organized. It builds on participatory economics (parecon) and the two are envisioned as running alongside each other (Albert, 2003; Hahnel, 2005; Shalom, 2010). Parecon uses participatory decision-making to guide the production, consumption and allocation of resources as an alternative to either capitalist or socialist economic structures (see Albert, 2003; Hahnel, 2005). Parpolity is based on the values of freedom, self-management, justice, solidarity and tolerance. Its

ambition is to allow people to participate in decision-making based on the principle that every person should have a say in a decision proportionate to the degree to which she or he is affected by that decision. Parpolity would necessitate liberty without intruding on others desires, equal treatment, defining and creating preferences in a participatory way, cooperation and diversity, a diverse media, and rotation and sharing of jobs so that everyone develops their highest level of political efficacy (Shalom, 2005). Parpolity advocates a different democracy than currently tends to exist and needs an equal society in order to function properly. Fung and Wright's (2001) 'empowered deliberative democracy' identified similar real-world processes in the participatory budgeting of Porto Alegre and the Panchayat reforms in West Bengal, India.

Bell's procedural justice indicators

Bell's (2014) Procedural Justice Indicator list suggests that the following should have been met in any participatory process that seeks environmental justice: all parties that were affected by environmental decisions were invited to contribute to the decision-making process, were treated with equal respect and value and would have access to sufficient material resources to enable them to participate on an equal footing. The environmental decision-making process would be open to all questions and alternatives and all environmental decisions would be made publicly. Furthermore, all affected would have an equal right and an equal chance to express their point of view and the relevant rules and procedures would be applied consistently. There would also be accurate and accessible information; authentic, accessible and honest communication and a lack of external coercion. All those affected would be included in all stages of decision-making. The national context would include freedom of association, the right to peaceful protest and free access to legal redress. Finally, none of these would be achieved by undermining the needs and rights of other species, people or future generations. Bell's indicator list incorporates some aspects of context, such as political freedoms, but has little to say about how these indicators might be achieved in different contexts.

The wheel of participation

Recent theory developed by Reed *et al.* (2018) suggests that the negative outcomes from public and stakeholder engagement may be explained by an inappropriate choice of engagement type for a given purpose or context, and a range of process design and external contextual factors (Reed *et al.*, 2018). Reed *et al.* (2018) suggest that their 'wheel of participation' is a more appropriate metaphor than Arnstein's ladder of participation because it removes value judgments about different types of engagement. They argue

that top-down engagement may be just as appropriate and effective as bottom-up approaches for some contexts and purposes. However, this fails to take into account the power dynamics Arnstein sought to overturn in her work. The normative goal of empowering publics and stakeholders still remains unmet in many engagement processes, and new thinking on participation needs to explain how it facilitates and subverts power relations between participants.

However, the key contribution of Reed *et al.* (2018) remains – its contention that the variation in outcomes from different types of engagement differs according to four factors (from Reed *et al.*, 2018, p. 1):

- Socioeconomic, cultural and institutional contextual factors; for instance, the existence of a participatory culture, former experiences of engagement and available resources.
- Process design factors (such as transparent, structured opportunities to engage).
- Power dynamics, the values of participants and their epistemologies; that is, the way they construct knowledge and which types of knowledge they consider valid.
- Temporal scales, such as early engagement and match to the temporal and spatial jurisdiction of the decisions and interests of stakeholders.

De Vente *et al.* (2016), who provided empirical evidence to underpin the wheel of participation, considered the relative importance of contextual versus design factors in determining the environmental and social benefits from participation. They concluded that there were more significant design variables than contextual factors and proposed that, by getting a small number of design variables 'right', it should be possible to achieve beneficial outcomes from participation in almost any context.

Synthesis and gaps in theory
The picture that emerges from these studies is complex. Each model has its strengths and weaknesses, with all having been critiqued on various grounds, sometimes without resolution. Participatory practitioners and those who engage in participatory decision-making could, therefore, remain understandably confused about the most effective, inclusive and empowering participatory process design. This underlines the importance of developing a clear model that can be implemented.

Each of the preceding theories explain 'what works' to create an ideal participatory process, with varying emphases. Table 2 summarizes the main emphases and considerations of these theories of inclusive participatory decision-making. It also assesses whether important design elements are apparent in the model, that is, whether the model takes into account context and temporality and whether it is holistic and implementable.

Table 2 Theories of inclusive participatory decision-making: main emphases and considerations

	Ladder	Citizen	Deliberative	Parpolity	PJI	Wheel
Factors emphasized						
Safe space	✔		✔		✔	✔
Inclusion	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
Accessibility	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
Resources	✔			✔	✔	
Equal power	✔		✔	✔	✔	
Deliberative	✔		✔	✔	✔	
Accountable	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
Feedback	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
Equal value	✔		✔	✔	✔	
Authenticity	✔		✔	✔	✔	✔
Transparency	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
Freedom	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
Considerations						
Context				✔	✔	✔
Temporal						✔
Holistic	✔		✔	✔	✔	
Implementable	✔	✔			✔	✔

It is evident that, while each model makes a strong contribution to our understanding of inclusive participation, they have some inadequacies in that they either ignore context, overlook temporal issues, are difficult to implement and/or focus only on partial aspects of the process. For example, Arnstein's ladder focuses on the dysfunctional power dynamics in participatory processes, while citizen assessments are largely concerned with objective and accountable procedures. However, both of these approaches to participation overlook the important role of context in mediating procedures. Deliberative democracy and parpolity also emphasize the role of procedural factors in explaining what works in participation, with a focus on language, communication, learning and the power of argument in the former; and additional transparent mechanisms and rights that empower citizens as active governing agents in the latter. While parpolity puts participation in political context, in both cases, there is limited consideration of the wider historical, cultural and other contexts in which participation is enacted. Bell's list considers a range of contextual factors, including access to resources, skills and information and respect for human rights, though it has little to say about how to ensure that the indicators can be delivered in different contexts. The wheel of participation stands in counterpoint to many of these frameworks, arguing that the levels of participation should not be associated with normative statements about their value. Removing these value judgments makes it possible to use whatever type of engagement

that is most appropriate for the given context and purpose. However, who then decides what is appropriate? A set of principles, while normative, can be adapted according to the context, as long as the end result achieves the principles, taken as a whole.

The normative and context critiques of the current models are related, then, in that being 'too normative' ignores context. Dean (2017) argues that strongly normative typologies of participation are inherently problematic because different participatory processes have different goals. Hence, the definition of participation should vary according to the context. However, although there may be multiple ways of viewing what constitutes good practice, giving other meanings to the word 'participation' could be manipulative, with people being encouraged to engage in the participatory process with the expectation of having a degree of influence that was not actually available to them. Therefore, a model that is normative, in the sense of setting some standards for ideal participatory practice, seems to be important. Normative models of participatory decision-making imply that certain universal standards should be met in process design to safeguard the needs of marginalized groups. However, setting such standards does not mean it is necessary to ignore context. What needs to be considered is: (i) how these different contexts might impact on the ability to achieve the principles and (ii) what (additional) actions should be taken to ensure that the principles can be achieved.

Therefore, to better include the role of context, an approach is now proposed which takes into account how the contexts in which participation is *situated* mediate empowerment and other desired outcomes. Specifically, our research sought to show how to organize participation such that normative standards and values can be reached in different social, cultural and institutional contexts. It also pays attention to the temporal dynamics of the participatory process in which participation takes place. In this way, the ToP model recognizes the changing importance of different factors throughout the participatory process.

This ToP model, therefore, aims to build on the strengths of the prior participation models and to overcome their limitations. It is normative, in being based on the fundamental value that participatory decision-making should be inclusive, empowering and emancipatory, particularly for the most marginalized and disadvantaged. However, it also enables context to be taken into account through building in flexibility.

Having identified some of the significant aspects of an ideal participatory process design through reviewing these prior models, the next section discusses the extent to which organizers and attendees of participatory processes perceive these elements to be present in the processes they have engaged in.

Practices of participation organizers

Those who answered the online survey were asked to rate how successful the participatory process they had engaged with or organized had been. Perceptions of 'success' of the participatory event/process ranged from 5 percent (i.e. not very successful at all) to 100 percent (i.e. completely successful), with an average assessment of 73 percent successful. Using this percentage score, the cases were divided into 'High Success Processes' (n25), 'Medium Success Processes' (n25) and 'Low Success Processes' (n25).

A space to write freely was then available to respond to a follow-on question 'Describe what was successful or unsuccessful from your perspective?'. In answers, it was evident that success was seen to be influenced by context, such as the prevailing political economy. For example, one survey respondent said 'We were seriously affected by the economic crash which caused large scale redundancies, so we lost participants'. Some of the process design factors that were perceived to have built success included adequate resources and good facilitation. For example, reflecting on the process, one survey respondent said 'Open-mindedness and better listening, and, as a result, better understanding are critical success factors'. On the negative side, ineffective outreach, inadequate chairing and inadequate attention to accessibility were highlighted as undermining success. This is evident in the following comment, where the survey respondent said of those who had attended the participatory decision-making event they had organized, 'They were still the "usual suspects". The kinds of people that usually turn up to these kinds of events'. Another said there was a problem with ' . . . allowing negative influencers to make the process more stressful for everyone, as a result of not setting clear enough ground rules at the start'. A further comment was that 'Some really struggled to understand and were unable to take discussion further. Also, some project experts presented material but were unable to excite a lay audience'.

The factors from the theoretical models which seemed to be most linked to perceived success were also identified by analyzing the answers to the other questions. The presence of factors laid out in Table 1 were assessed by participants on a scale of one to five according to how strongly the factor was perceived to be present (one being low and five being high). All of the principles listed seemed to be more present in the participation processes that were rated as 'High Success Processes' (see Figure 1).

The survey respondents that had organized participatory processes were also asked: 'Which, if any, particular groups were targeted for inclusion in the process? (choose all relevant – Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic; low-income; women; disabled people; LGBTQIA+ and other marginalized or oppressed groups)'. Since these groups, together, make up the majority
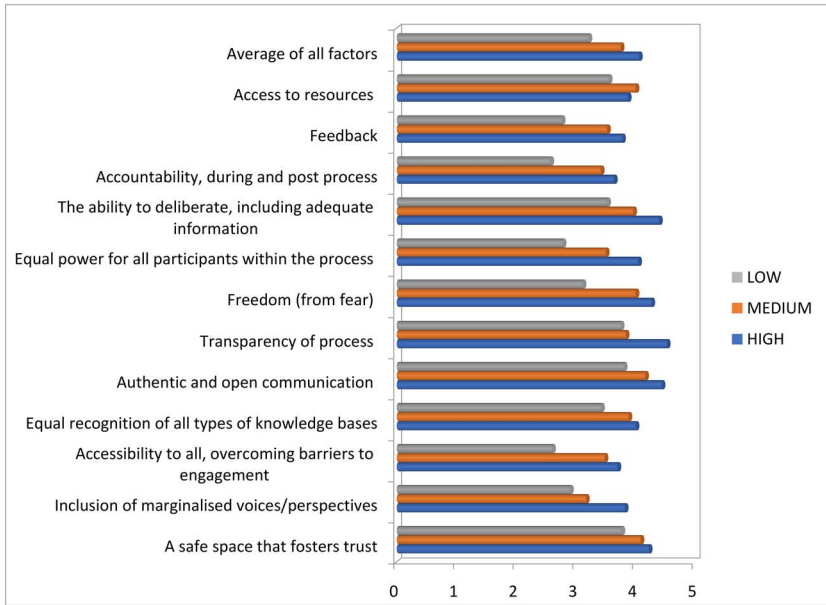
Figure 1 Factors linked to degree of success (low, medium and high) based on 'Participation: What Works?' survey, 2018

of the population of the United Kingdom, it was assumed that it would be relevant to include them. The next question they were asked was 'To what extent did you adapt the process to empower these groups?'. Overall, 35 of the 50 organizers said they had adapted the process for these groups (70 percent) – 16 were organizers of the 'High Success Processes'; 12 were organizers of the 'Medium Success Processes' and 7 were organizers of the 'Low Success Processes'. Although these are small numbers, it is interesting that the High Success Processes were more likely to have been adapted to ensure the effective inclusion of relevant equalities groups. There is evident scope for more organizers to do this, given the social justice considerations and that equalities groups are so prevalent in the population. It has been noted that participatory processes can deepen the exclusion of already marginalized groups unless explicit inclusion efforts are made (see, e.g. Guijt and Kaul Shah, 1998). It would also be important to consider 'intersectionality' (Crenshaw, 1989), the multiple oppressions encountered by some. A number of studies provide information on how to be inclusive across equalities groups (e.g. Coulter and Collins, 2011; Beresford, 2013; Bell, 2021), though there is, in general, much more to work to be done on how to make the elements of ideal participatory decision-making a reality for marginalized groups.

Discussion – a situated theory of participatory empowerment

The synthesis of theories to date raised a number of questions: Can you have a generalizable model of participation? How can it be simple enough to be useful and complex enough to have power? How can a model be developed, which takes into account that which we have no control over, for example, context? The survey evidence suggested that all of the factors theorized as necessary for inclusive participation were more evident in the processes that were considered to be successful. From the quantitative data, some factors seemed to be particularly associated with success, such as feedback, accountability, equal power, freedom from fear, accessibility and inclusion (see Figure 1), but the qualitative comments about success indicate that all the factors matter.

The metaphor of a tree is now used to describe a conceptual model which builds on this understanding of the preceding theories and the empirical data to form an integrated theory that derives its explanatory power from its breadth of coverage. First, it organizes each of the theoretical propositions about what works from preceding theories into a process-based framework that emphasizes the role of factors that precede and proceed from a participatory process. Second, it explains how participatory processes can empower participants by adapting to different and changing contexts.

Most current thinking about participation is focused on engagement during the participatory process but, for a process to empower participants, there are a number of important additional factors that explain why participation does or does not lead to empowerment. Some of these must be present prior to engagement, and some must be taken into account long after the engagement process has officially come to an end.

Based on the literature reviewed and the survey responses, it was theorized that the precursors to participatory empowerment may include: (i) the creation of safe spaces that foster trust; (ii) steps to ensure any process is as inclusive as possible of marginalized voices and (iii) systematically identifying and overcoming barriers to engagement, such as cost, language and cultural barriers.

Factors that affect empowerment during the engagement process may include: (i) equality between participants that respects and values different knowledges and contributions; (ii) epistemological flexibility to recognize, evaluate and integrate contributions that are drawn from very different knowledge bases; (iii) authenticity; (iv) transparency; (v) agency, including freedom (from fear), and access to the resources and other means necessary to actively participate; (vi) representation based on democratic mandate and (vii) the ability to deliberate.

Factors that may continue to build empowerment or disempower participants post-process include: (i) accountability, ensuring that decisions are faithfully implemented and reflect outcomes from the group process, representing complexity and difference and (ii) feedback loops that keep people informed about how their knowledge is being used.

In addition to the factors that explain how participation leads to empowerment before, during and after the process, a key feature of participatory empowerment is flexibility. Processes that lead to empowerment are characterized by their ability to adapt to the stage of the process, as contexts change over time or when they are applied in new and different contexts. Aspects of context that may be dynamic include time; objectives of the participatory process; spatial scales; social-cultural contexts; political-governance contexts; historical contexts; and power dynamics.

All of the above process, contextual and temporal factors are combined in the ToP model (see Figure 2). The ToP model suggests twelve factors for inclusive and effective participatory processes and seven contextual factors that feed that process. The model is symbolized and depicted as a tree because a tree can be used to make either a ladder or a rudimentary wheel (the metaphors used to describe the two most contrasting existing participation frameworks – Arnstein's and Reed's models). A tree requires an adequate environment (the context); can be pruned and trained (as the participatory process can be designed) and the whole tree (outcomes for marginalized participants) is greater than the sum of its parts (the components of the participatory process). The tree is envisaged as follows: pre-process is represented by the roots; the process itself is represented by the branches; and post-process is represented by the leaves. Context surrounds the tree (air, soil, other trees, plants, etc.). All the components, including the context, interrelate. There is no suggestion of any kind of hierarchy of factors. Each is integrated with the others.

It would be useful to follow up with interviews to assess in more detail how people attending participatory processes perceive their effectiveness and whether this model is helpful for them. The model could be further developed as part of an iterative participatory process.

Of course, this model has been built through the input of those who organize or attend participatory events. It would also be important to consider those who do not take part. A lack of resources would almost certainly prevent many people on low incomes from taking part in consultation or planning events (see Bell, 2019), but these restrictions may not be recognized by the people who organize or attend these events. In fact, this would be an essential follow-up because, otherwise, it would be making the same mistake that the research seeks to address – not including the least powerful in the decision-making about the model. The model has also built on data
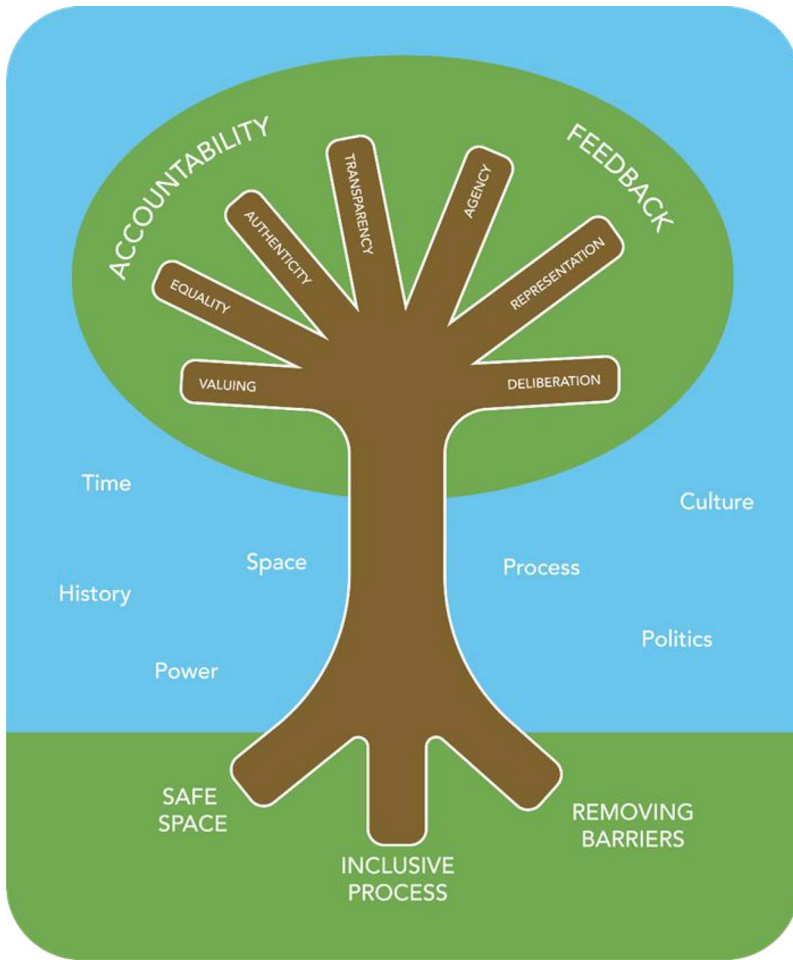
Figure 2 The ToP

from UK participants, so this may limit its applicability internationally. Further research would be helpful to test it in a range of scenarios.

Conclusion

Whether or not it is useful for community development workers to organize formal participatory decision-making processes clearly depends on the quality of the participatory process and its inherent fairness. It is important to have a theoretically rigorous and easily applicable model which can guide practitioners in this. It is also important for the public to be able to recognize a process worth getting involved in which they can properly influence.

With regard to previous endeavors to develop such a model, all the above participatory theories have their strengths and weaknesses and, between them, cover all bases. However, the intention was to conceptualize a simple model that included all the necessary elements, incorporating power, justice and agency. The ToP model seems to do this. It has strength in being a holistic model that could be utilized as a one-stop-shop reference. The principles have to be achieved in a way which best makes sense of the context, using the most appropriate methods to do this. In particular, where the inclusion of equalities groups is considered, it is necessary to understand how to empower these groups in the participatory undertaking. We, therefore, propose the ToP as a model which provides a framework from which to design an emancipatory and inclusive participatory decision-making process.

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