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Discursive Arenas: Deliberation and the Constitution of Identity in Public Participation at a Local Level

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ABSTRACT   *This article is based on empirical research into public participation in two English cities. It discusses issues related to motivations to take part in public participation initiatives and the way in which individual and collective identities may be constructed through participation. Drawing on social movement theory it emphasises the importance both of networks and values in prompting participation and it illustrates this with examples drawn from participation initiatives based around identities: age, gender, ethnicity, and issues/interests such as health inequalities, community regeneration and social care service provision. The analysis suggests it is important to understand the histories and motivations of officials as well as citizens who take part, and questions the priority given to 'representation' in constituting the membership of participation forums.*

KEY WORDS: Activist motivations, networks, oppositional consciousness, participative democracy, representation

Introduction

The growth of participative forms of democratic practice has raised many questions: about who takes part; the legitimacy of participative forums in the context of public policy-making; and the relationship between participative and representative democracy. An apparent commitment by the state to participative modes of decision-making has also contributed to a blurring of the relationship between the state and civil society. Participants in NGOs, community groups and social movements find themselves invited or encouraged to take part in state-sponsored participation initiatives which aim for consensus building and seek to minimise protest. In this context this article addresses questions of who takes part in public participation initiatives and why they do so; what part identity plays in motivating participation; how involvement contributes to the development of subjective and collective identities and how this may question the emphasis on 'representation' as a basis for legitimate membership of participation forums.

The article is based on research carried out as part of the Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC) Democracy and Participation programme in two English cities. Both cities contain areas of substantial deprivation and had implemented policies intended to enable people excluded from decision-making to take part. But they have rather different demographic profiles, different political cultures and histories of community action. One city had a strong tradition of community activism (usually based around very local areas), but a troubled local political history. Residents were cynical about the local authority and elected members. The health authority in this city had demonstrated considerable commitment to public participation. In the second city with a substantial minority ethnic population, strong ethnic identities helped shape the political landscape. The local authority had instigated a policy of some (very limited) devolution of power to ward committees, but participation initiatives were less developed in the National Health Service (NHS) context.

The research comprised case studies of 17 participation initiatives, spanning a range of policy areas and deriving from initiatives which had their origins at an international, national, local and community level. Broadly, the case studies can be categorised as those which aimed to improve public services; those designed to develop neighbourhood and community governance; those which can be considered issue-based social movement organisations (SMOs); and those where the organising principle was that of identity (see Barnes *et al.*, in press, 2007, for details of all 17 initiatives). Identity based initiatives included two senior citizens' forums, a gay and lesbian forum, a women's advice and information centre and a minority ethnic group council sponsored by a community health service. But, as we argue below, the question of how identity is experienced, expressed, represented or constituted is not restricted to those initiatives which are self-consciously defined in this way. Thus we can also consider the significance of this in the context of initiatives such as a social services user group, a single regeneration budget (SRB) youth participation initiative and a community-based health project.

The analysis that follows is based on interviews with both citizen and official participants in these case studies. Those interviewed included citizens with long histories of activism as well as some for whom this was their first experience of participation. The officials included those who had made a conscious decision to work in areas where they could implement a personal commitment to citizen participation and others who had been given these responsibilities as 'part of the job'. As well as inviting respondents to tell us about the origins and aims of the initiative and of their experience of taking part in it, we also invited people to tell us about themselves and how they came to become involved. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed using Atlasti. This analysis has been carried out at three levels: we have looked at individual interview transcripts in order to understand how individual participants accounted for their involvement; we looked at specific case studies in order to explore the interaction between individual motivations and experiences of participation in a process of collective identity-building; and we looked for cross-cutting themes which reflect those aspects of personal identity that appear to be significant in motivating participation. In this article we draw from these three levels of analysis to examine why people got involved and whether there was evidence of collective identity-building within participation forums, using an analytical framework drawn from social movement theory.

In using this framework to discuss public participation in processes of policy-making and implementation, two obvious challenges arise. The first concerns whether these are

necessarily SMOs. However, we are not concerned whether the forums we studied fall 'in' or 'out' of the discrete category of phenomena defined as 'social movements'. Rather, following Melucci (1996), we are working with a notion of 'social movement' as an *analytical concept,* rather than an empirical category. This constructivist approach is one we have also adopted in our discussion of the way in which 'the public' is constituted for the purpose of public participation (Barnes *et al.*, 2003). The second challenge concerns the consensual, rather than conflictual, objectives of public participation initiatives. The collective 'we' in social movements has been seen to relate to an 'oppositional consciousness' (Mansbridge & Morris, 2001) and such movements are usually understood to operate outside the formal political system. In contrast, many of the new forms of deliberative practice that have developed to revive citizen engagement in political and democratic processes have been designed to enable deliberation among a cross section of citizens in order to generate agreement (Bobbio, 2003).

Whether the collective identity-building that might be considered to take place in participation forums generates an oppositional consciousness is, for us, an empirical question. In examining this issue we have found that the social movement literature offers helpful ways of understanding the formation of such consciousness. For example Morris & Braine argue that 'Environmentalists and antinuclear activists have to build identity, solidarity, and consciousness "from the ground up" because generally they are not mobilising in the context of either personal identities that have an existing subordinate meaning in the social system or entrenched oppositional communities' (2001, p. 21) This does not mean that an 'oppositional consciousness' is inevitable within oppressed populations, rather the process of building such a consciousness is argued to be necessary whatever the group that is being mobilised.

However, while a social movement framework is helpful, it is also important to point out places at which the insights offered by social movement theory do not seem to 'fit' with the empirical material we have generated. This alerts us to the differences between different forms and origins of collective action and to the tensions that may arise when one form of action is 'co-opted' into another.

Networks, Motivations and Mobilization

Social movement theorists offer different explanations for why people take part. As Melucci observes (1996, p. 43), it is possible to find empirical evidence that would support a wide range of frameworks that have been offered to explain why social movements emerge. However, a simplistic 'right and wrong' response to these different perspectives is not entirely helpful. We align ourselves primarily with those who draw from a socio-cultural perspective, emphasising the significance of value systems, the way in which actors make sense of their own situations and their responses to dissatisfactions with institutional or broader social norms, rather than with those who adopt a position deriving from rational choice theory (see e.g. Crossley, 2002, Chap. 4).

The design of our research was intended to understand the way in which power relationships influenced *opportunities* for participation, particularly as we started with an interest in understanding how public participation may challenge or reinforce social exclusions. Tarrow (1994) has highlighted the importance of such 'opportunity structures' that frame the context in which social movements mobilise membership and construct strategies for action. Subsequently we explored the way in which 'legitimate membership'

is negotiated and notions of 'the public' are constructed in the context of discourses of community and representation (Barnes *et al.*, 2003). This analysis emphasised the dialogic nature of the processes through which people are constituted as legitimate participants. Not only do public agencies create limited opportunity structures by defining legitimate membership, but citizens also bring to participation initiatives their own sense of who *should* be involved as well as their own histories and experiences that suggest to them that some form of collective action is worthwhile. But this is not a one-off decision. In seeking to understand how collective action is mobilised and sustained we need to understand how actors make sense of social relationships, how they come to believe existing relationships need to be challenged, and how the experience of collective action itself impacts their conception of self and social relationships.

The view of early theorists (e.g. Kornhauser, 1959; Gusfield, 1963) that social movement activists were primarily people who were dislocated, alienated and isolated has been discounted by a range of empirical research. It is evident that those who are better integrated into social networks are more likely to be recruited to social movements and that among the 'core groups' of such movements are found a high percentage of people from 'mid to high' social positions (Della Porta & Diani, 1999). The evidence regarding the composition of social movement activists is reflected in practitioner concerns that public participation initiatives only involve 'the usual suspects'.

The significance of social networks in affecting individual decisions to get involved, as well as the significance of networks in sustaining social movements, has been extensively researched (Diani & McAdam, 2003). The extent, intensity and overlap between various types of networks are important and there is not a simple linear relationship between networks, community and movement participation. As Diani (2003) describes:

> Typically, social movement activists and sympathizers are linked through both 'private' and 'public' ties well before collective action develops. Personal friends, relatives, colleagues, and neighbours, may all affect individual decisions to become involved in a movement; so may people who share with prospective participants some kind of collective engagement, such as previous or current participation in other movement activities, political or social organizations, and public bodies. (p. 7)

For Melucci and others who reject rational choice theory, networks represent the context in which interactions between individuals produce both the cognitive and affective schema that can connect individuals to collective action (1996, p. 65). This suggests the importance of understanding the nature of the social relationships of those who become engaged in action not only in structural terms, but also at a micro level. It is within such networks and relationships that we might find the production of *motivations* for participation – a concept which can be distinguished from the 'incentives' that rational choice theorists invoke in explaining the evaluation of costs and benefits of participation.

Motivations for Participation

Many of those who took part in these participation initiatives had previous experience of activism: in trades unions, political parties, voluntary organisations, self-help groups or community action. Some of the officials shared similar histories with community members. Analysis of the interviews in which people described their backgrounds, aspects

of their personality or personal and social circumstances, and their motivations to become involved revealed the significance of different types of commitments and values in motivating participation. These included:

- Commitment to an area, for example, young people involved in a government-funded regeneration initiative saw this as an opportunity to bring improvement to the area in which they had lived all their lives.
- A religious commitment that underpinned involvement in a range of different initiatives, and provided a value base leading to social action to improve people's lives.
- A commitment to a cause about which people could become very knowledgeable. This included both citizens and officials involved in a Local Agenda 21 environmental initiative, and others involved in a community health project.
- An awareness of being a representative of 'a people' – reflected in the motivations of participants from minority ethnic groups in more generic forums, such as a social services user group and an older people's forum.
- Lifelong commitment to causes of various kinds – party political, trade union, peace campaigns, women's groups. In some cases the origins of such commitments lay in political activity, in others it lay in professional backgrounds. People with broadly based commitments to social justice who identified this as a source of motivation were engaged in a range of public participation activity.
- Commitments deriving from personal experiences of difference, exclusion or disadvantage. This could include experiences of poverty, disability, or differences related to sexuality, gender or ethnicity.

Most of those who took part had quite considerable networks characterised by cultural values conducive to collective action and which were often the means by which they were recruited to participation – both formally through being invited to 'represent' one group to another, and informally via knowing others who were already involved. The following examples illustrate ways in which personal identities and motivations related to the networks in which they were involved:

- June is involved in a community group that had campaigned to prevent the closure of a local health centre and then re-constituted itself on a more formal basis to raise funding for a new centre to be run by community members. She had previously worked in the health service. June was a point of contact for people living in the area who had difficulties with benefit claims, legal or health issues. She had been involved in a tenants' association and gained qualifications as a tenants' participation officer. She was also leading a campaign to enable mothers to obtain baby clothes and equipment cheaply, and involved in campaigns to improve transport and local shops. She described herself as having been a fighter all her life and someone for whom rights and equality were 'big issues'.
- Teri was very explicit about the relationship between her sense of 'who she is' and her involvement in a user group seeking to improve community care services: 'I used to describe myself as a disability activist which I suppose underneath I still am . . . It is part of my life. I am a disabled person. My mum has got this impairment, so I was very much aware of it as I grew up. I have brothers who have got it. My son

has got an impairment. I live very much in a disability world. So I am just a natural fighter I think. It is naturally part of who I am. That is why I say I am a disabled activist'. She had been active in the students' union while she was at college and in a disability rights group. Following the birth of her own child, she had become involved in maternity campaigning where she felt she was campaigning for all mothers and children. Her account offers a rather different perspective on the issue of oppositional consciousness among disabled people than that suggested by Groch (2001). The 'disability world' that she inhabits is not the closed world which Groch argues contributes to the construction of strong collective identities, but rather the source of a sense of injustice which encourages her to become active in other contexts as well.

- Derek was the secretary of a senior citizens forum (SCF). He had been an active trade unionist and a member of a left political party for most of his life. He described his move from party and trade union activism into a regional pensioners' convention as a 'seamless transition'. From there he had become a founder member of the SCF. He spoke about structural factors motivating involvement and of the way in which his personal activist identity had led him to this type of collective action: ' . . . when people retire they go through a certain amount of trauma, of loss of work identity and the discipline of work, and there is also the trauma of suffering a considerable drop in earnings . . . I have always been involved in political activities since I was 14. So the Pensioners' Movement was in fact an important focus for me because I felt that in addition to the problems individuals face on retirement, there's a whole body of retired people who are virtually excluded from all sorts of things . . . '

- Tony had been active in a number of environmental groups, CND and anti-apartheid groups before he took part in the Local Agenda 21 Sustainability Forum established by a local authority. He has a doctorate and described himself as 'over-educated!' He suggested that there was a class bias among environmental activists ' . . . because those people are more established in society in the way that they have access to, or they expect to have access to the levers of power, or they expect to have their say and be listened to'.

- Young people involved in a youth forum were recruited through informal networks within the area: they had been to school together, knew each other's families and hung out together in a local park. They shared a South Asian ethnic identity. They also shared a concern to do something to improve the area and the opportunities for young people who lived there. Mohamed, the identified leader of the forum, was very critical about 'official' youth projects in the area: 'I noticed that they weren't targeting the young people they were supposed to be. Because I have got quite a bit of influence over the younger people in the area, I decided to set up my own forum'. Sheena, a young woman who became involved in the youth forum, had also worked as a volunteer and as a community worker in the area. She also expressed dissatisfaction with the 'official' youth project in terms of its capacity to generate change: 'There was no focus, no structure, there was nothing happening in my opinion at that time . . . To me it was just like a bunch of people getting together and doing some fun activities here and there, but nothing that would have an impact or a change in the community'.

Not all those we interviewed could point to a history of activism. But what was common was that participants had identified something that they felt to be unjust or wrong about the world in which they found themselves and had decided that it was worthwhile to act collectively to try to achieve change. In some cases that decision had been made and acted on independently of any official action to encourage participation (such as Mohamed's decision to create a youth forum); in others, such as mothers who became involved in Sure Start, an initiative working with families with children under five in deprived areas (see below), they had been encouraged by local workers to recognise that they *could* take part to make a difference.

Action was sometimes but not always the result of an 'oppositional consciousness', developed to resist subordinate identities and claim a positive identification to rectify injustice (Mansbridge, 2001). In some instances action was a response to dissatisfactions with the limits of official action (in the case of the youth forum), or based in an issue-based oppositional position (as in the case of the sustainability forum). The latter corresponds to what Morris & Braine (2001, p. 21) describe as 'fully chosen' activist identities. And for some motivation is better understand in terms of what Gecas (2000) terms value-based identities, which he suggests are both relatively enduring and which transcend specific roles or institutional contexts.

These examples also illustrate the different functions that Passy (2003) argues are played by networks in prompting social movement participation. Networks among young people in a deprived area served the *socialisation* function, which Passy argues creates the initial disposition to participate, and also provided the *structural-connection function* by connecting the young people to opportunities to take part. In this, and other cases, *decisions* to take part are also mediated by social networks – what Passy calls the *decision shaping function*

As well as talking to 'members of the public' about their backgrounds and motivations for involvement, we asked similar questions of those officials who were directly involved in these participation initiatives. Of course 'officials' are also 'members of the public' and in some cases, although their involvement was paid and a recognised part of their job, there were important similarities in their motivations to get involved in this particular aspect of their work, and some could also point to similar activist histories. Sheena (see above) is one example of someone evidencing considerable continuity between her identity as a paid worker and as an active participant in an autonomous youth forum. Similar examples can be quoted from officials involved in the sustainability forum and a community group working to develop a new Healthy Living Centre that would be controlled and run by community members.

In other cases officials' involvement in these participation initiatives grew out of their paid work and a wish to work in a participative way that was not always possible or rewarded. Thus Peter, who had over 20 years' experience as a social worker and team manager, decided to take a job as a user involvement officer. We interviewed him in the context of our study of a disabled people's user group. He explained why he was involved in this:

> I think I operated with the principle that what people using the service said was important, and that didn't often seem to be the case for other people . . . So when this job came up, which basically combined a bit of carers stuff and a bit of user involvement stuff, and I was fed up with my efforts not being in the least bit

appreciated by the Department's managers on the children's side, so it was the time to move and it was an interesting job to do.

Such officials might be considered 'allies' of the citizens with whom they engage in participation forums, although they can occupy an uncomfortable position, constrained as they are by the institutional rules within which they have to operate. There was evidence of different accommodations being made between the competing identities of 'official representative' and 'user or citizen ally'. In some cases there was indication of a professional distancing operating to define officials' roles in relation to public involvement. Thus a youth worker involved in the youth project Mohamed spoke of, said:

> 'I think at the end of the day what we have to bear in mind is that hopefully the youth worker and certainly within the youth service the workers develop particular skills of being able to work with young people in a way that they participate and so on. And it is a skilful job . . . '

While for the Sure Start manager involved in the community health group her identification as a community member for the purposes of taking part in this action meant that she was reluctant to use her professional knowledge for fear of 'skewing' the group's deliberations.

For others, the possibility of expressing their personal commitments to an issue through their official position in which they were facilitating public involvement was a means of avoiding the dilemma of a dual identity. A council officer working with a LA21 Sustainability Forum explained why she did not attend her local neighbourhood forum in pursuance of her environmental commitments:

> I think for me it's a bit of a dilemma, being a Council officer. Rather than going along as a resident and start shouting at my councillors, who are my bosses, who know me, which is quite a difficult thing to do, so I've felt that even when I've gone along, when they've asked me to take part in a group I've found that really difficult – where am I? Who am I? What's my role here? They say just come as a resident. Well I am, but they won't know where my views are coming from, one moment I'll be Ms Council and the next Ms Resident.

These responses indicate the importance of understanding how 'officials' negotiate their personal and professional roles within participation forums and for any analysis of the dynamics of such forums and the process of constructing collective identities within them to encompass the social relations of citizens/officials.

Constructing Collective Identities

Results from this study of participation in local policy-making suggest that insights from social movement theory concerning the relationship between identities and motivations *is* relevant to an understanding of why people become involved, but that this cannot always be understood by reference to protest or opposition. Melucci sees identity as the result of 'what people choose to be' (1996, p. 66), but emerging out of choices which have a strong non-rational – *affective* – dimension. In this conceptualisation identity is not determined

by structure, but involves an active process of making sense of oneself and one's connections to others in order to construct a self that 'is charged with emotion and meaning and directs the orientation of action.' (1996, p. 66) Individuals become motivated to take part in movements with others through a process of deciding that action is worthwhile to achieve change, that it makes sense in terms of their sense of who they are, what they value and how they stand in relation to the world.

We also considered the process by which these participation forums may constitute a site within which *collective identity* production takes place. This involves a collective definition of the meaning of the action in which actors are engaged, the field within which change is sought, the means by which objectives may be achieved, and the opportunities and constraints that operate within this field. Melucci defines collective identity as 'the process of 'constructing' an action system.' (1996, p. 70) The notion of process is important – this is not something that happens at one point in time, but rather is negotiated on a recurrent basis. This may be through the generation of ritual, practices, norms and rules as groups become more institutionalised; it may be through forms of organisation, communication and leadership which constitute the network of relationships in which actors are involved; and it will involve both cognitive definitions of the means and ends of actions, and affective investments in the action and what it is intended to achieve.

Collective identity-building in social movements involves the recognition of a 'we' and the difference between that 'we' and the rest of society. This is one way in which many of the forms of public participation that we have studied might be considered to be different from SMOs. At least in terms of aspirations, many public participation initiatives are intended to 'represent' a broader public rather than emphasise difference between participants and non-participants. Citizen participants need to claim connections with non-participants in order to authenticate their legitimacy to speak on behalf of others. Official justifications for enhanced public participation include a desire to build social cohesion, rather than to generate opposition (e.g. Blunkett, 2003). Nevertheless, the processes of determining the field in which change is sought, the means by which objectives are to be pursued and the establishment of group practices and of roles for different actors within them are likely to apply in the case of a broad range of instances in which citizens come together to achieve change in public policies or services. Processes of collective identity-building are likely to be important in sustaining engagement within participation forums as well as SMOs.

Our analysis can help us to understand the significance of identity among those groups which are not constituted on the basis of what is usually understood as 'identity', such as ethnicity, gender, age or sexuality, but which instead require a commitment to collective action framed by issues or interests. In our study the issues which provided the field of action included poverty, environmental sustainability and the regeneration of neighbourhoods, as well as shared interests such as the common use of particular services, and living in a particular place. In this section we focus on the dynamic processes evident within participation forums and reflect on what these suggest about them as discursive arenas within which identity is constructed rather than represented. We select from our 17 case studies to illustrate forums in which some sense of a shared identity was a starting point of action, and others in which this was not the case.

Some people who became involved in participation forums because they recognised disadvantage or injustice and wanted to act collectively to challenge this experienced the process of collective identity-building through their participation. It was evident that both cognitive and affective factors contributed to this process. Among women workers and

volunteers in a women's advice centre that was described by the co-coordinator as 'an arena in which some women have the space to shape and articulate a collective voice based on their experience', affective discourse was common. At an annual general meeting when those attending were asked to introduce themselves most spoke in terms of their feelings about their involvement in the work of the group, using words such as 'joy', 'pleasure' and 'reward'. There were deliberate attempts to make connections across lines of difference among women, including between workers and volunteers, and interviews with women involved suggested this had a transformative impact – not simply on women's opinions, but a deeper transformation of their sense of self:

> It's made me look at people quite differently – because I'm from an older generation, I had set ideas – working here has challenged those.

A similar sense of the importance of affective ties in supporting and sustaining collective action was evident in an older people's group, formed to influence both local and national policies and services. The strongly felt nature of many of the issues that formed the substance of the forum's discussions gave rise to sometimes emotionally charged debates. The nature of the exchanges among forum members also illustrated the significance of Young's (2000) concept of 'greeting' as an important element not only of deliberation but as a means through which the sense of a 'we' can develop. There were frequent references in interviews to the friendliness, respect, tolerance and humour evident within this forum.

These relationships were sustained not only through the formal business of the group but also through the ritual of sharing tea or coffee before and after meetings. But the humour could also be used to gloss over differences within the group. Observation of one meeting had suggested that one group member had been deflected in raising an issue by means of a rather jokey intervention from the chair. During interview he raised this:

> The people, the chairman for example, he definitely avoids controversy. I don't know whether you noticed at that last meeting, he himself said he was going to raise under any other business the character of that meeting or something to do with the meeting, but when I raised it under any other business, as I thought he'd already agreed to do, I was sat on in that sense. They didn't want me to pursue it. And as I said, it's not been mentioned in the minutes.

Internal differences can put a strain on collective identities. For example, a social services user group illustrated tensions among members concerning purpose that were evident in responses to the nature of exchanges within the forum. The purpose was described as enabling a voice for users of social care services. There was contestation within the group about whether voice should be understood as individual advocacy, personal testimony or collective action with specific change objectives. Some members spoke of the importance of the forum as a site in which experiential knowledge, expressed in accounts of personal experiences, could be exchanged. Another view was that this was inadequate as a basis for achieving change, or at least that there was little evidence of testimony informing more general campaigns. Differences between user groups had led to a fracturing before the research took place: mental health service users had left because they felt their particular experiences and interests were inadequately acknowledged within

the group. Nevertheless this group had been in existence for over ten years and was sustained both by organisational practices, but also by the enduring significance of people's identities as service users as a basis on which to act to secure change.

A community group which was founded to campaign for better health services in an area of considerable poverty and deprivation demonstrated some of the tensions in forums which aim to bring together citizens and officials working to achieve similar objectives. Interviews with members of the group spoke of long histories of active involvement in their communities and there was a clear indication of commitment to the local area and people living within it. In some instances this was related to religious values, in others to personal experience of poor treatment within the health service, while others were aware of health inequalities and service deficiencies as a result of working in statutory agencies in the area. The citizen members demonstrated a very strong belief in the importance of local people taking action on their own behalf and, at times, a healthy scepticism of statutory agencies and elected councillors. Some interviewees expressed considerable frustration about lack of attendance of 'officials' that appeared to undermine the notion that this was a 'partnership'. Interviews also suggested an awareness of the potential for knowledge/experience deriving from working within statutory agencies to undermine the nature and purpose of the group.

While such 'insider knowledge' could be extremely useful to the group in its dealings with official agencies, there was also a danger that it could act as an unhelpful influence, and that too heavy a reliance on knowledge from official sources could undermine the objective of community members 'doing it for themselves'. One aspect of this was seen to operate at the emotional level – there was recognition of the level of commitment among community members to the objectives of the group, which could be damaged by too frequent reference to sources of information to which most group members did not have access. At one level this was an example of an arena within which a lay discourse of injustice and community action could engage in effective dialogue with 'official' discourses around health inequalities and community involvement. At another level it illustrated the difficulty of maintaining the active involvement of community members who had developed an oppositional consciousness through campaigning *against* the action of an official agency once the group was involved in working with official 'partners' and needing to get to grips with official rules and procedures.

A rather different instance of a 'partnership' participation initiative was a Sure Start project. A key principle of Sure Start is that parents and grandparents should be active participants. Those targeted for participation are often people with no previous experience of activism. In this context we observed considerable effort on the part of officials to encourage participation and to develop skills and confidence among participants to sustain their involvement. However, three parents had resigned from the advisory board because of other commitments, and because they felt unable to contribute. The chair of the advisory board was a local grandmother, but had also worked in the health service and had a history of working in a voluntary capacity. She sought to make deliberate use of her dual identity as grandparent and ex-health professional to make connections between parents and officials involved in the group. In discussions she frequently referred to her own experience thereby taking the item out of its formal context and translating it into a parental context. A local councillor who was also a member of the board used her reputation as being 'stroppy' to gently but consistently challenge some of the managerial positions and proposals and open up the discussion to encourage others to consider alternative options. And the local vicar, also a member of the board, was seen to play an

important role through his capacity for making people feel welcome and valued – another example of the significance of 'greeting' in facilitating dialogue and building a collective identity.

One of the women who had remained involved demonstrated the growth of what might be considered a collective consciousness:

> . . . if you look at the communities nowadays they are being dragged and torn apart. Bringing that together has got to be a good thing from families and children. We have to realise that it is a multi-cultural society now and we have to provide services that will benefit everybody.

Nevertheless, we cannot really cite this as an example of a collective identity being constructed through dialogue and action within this forum. A failure to secure sustained and extensive involvement suggests that local parents and grandparents did not see the Sure Start initiative as a forum in which they could construct an action system that made sense to them – particularly when other demands on their time and energies were experienced as pressing. The absence of previous experience of activism may also suggest that their networks were not ones within which political mobilisation was supported. At least within the period that we were researching this initiative, this forum appeared to be a deliberate attempt to develop collective awareness, but had so far failed to persuade a significant number of people that this made sense in terms of who they were and how they stood in relation to the world.

Our final example is of an identity-based group that stood in a very different relationship to the official sphere than the women's group or the senior citizens forum discussed above. The Minority Ethnic Group Council was established by a health trust as a means of helping the trust develop services that were more sensitive to the needs of minority ethnic groups. We studied one of the working groups of this council – established to consider human resource issues. The aim was to ensure representation of the main ethnic groups within the city. Thus, citizen participants came from diverse ethnic groups that may not have considered themselves as 'we' – other than in distinction to the white majority. The composition of the group was predominantly from the professional middle classes who engaged with the trust officials responsible for supporting the group and pursuing action arising from group decisions through a process of often quite sophisticated argumentation. What might be considered a 'tight' relationship developed between regular attendees of the group – both citizens and officials. This could cause difficulties for newcomers seeking to break into the forum. The collective identity that appeared to be being constructed within this forum was based less on a shared ethnic identity, but rather on what might be considered a 'liberal professional' identity. There was little evidence that the minority ethnic group participants saw themselves as subordinate to the officials with whom they were engaged in dialogue. The discourses within which such dialogues took place were professionalised and 'oppositional' positions were argued on the basis of evidence rather than conflicting ideological positions or positions deriving from different cultural or value systems.

Discussion

This article has considered the value of applying understandings developed in the theorisation of social movements to a consideration of how and why people take part in

participative policy forums, and to the dynamics of those forums. The analysis raises a number of important issues for an understanding of public participation forums as discursive arenas in which the voices of diverse groups of citizens might be articulated and heard in the policy process, and in which collective identities might be constructed.

First, it has considerable significance in relation to the aspiration that participation forums might engage a 'representative' group of citizens. Those seeking to promote public participation as a basis on which 'better' decisions about policy and services can be reached have a particular concern to go beyond what are often called 'the usual suspects' to include participants from social groups least likely to take part. But previous research into social movements as well as this study suggests that it is 'too late' to address this at the point at which participation in such forums is being sought and encouraged. People's motivations to participate in both social movement and participative forums are forged in the interaction between their personal experiences and the social networks in which they have been engaged. The positive perspective on this is that those who become involved bring with them considerable experience and knowledge, as well as commitments to collective and social justice values from which policy-making can benefit. More negatively, those experiences can sometimes lead to the adoption of models of participation that are unlikely to encourage new participants (Barnes, 2005).

But there is another problem with the notion of representation. The concept of representation depends on a simple and static notion of identity: representation is sought on the basis of characteristics that are considered to define the individual and to enable a sufficiently broad range of participation. This fails to acknowledge either the differentiated nature of identity, or the significance of the processes of identity construction that take place across lines of difference through participation – the process of collective identity-building that Melucci and other theorists have explored. This is a process in which both citizens and officials are implicated and which has the potential to increase the distance between participants and non-participants.

In the first section of this article we raised the issue of the differences between SMOs and officially sponsored participation initiatives. Social movements have usually been understood to operate outside the state and have their basis in opposition or protest. However, social movement activists have questioned not only what should constitute legitimate subject-matter for public policy-making, but also the processes by which policy decisions are reached and who is involved in that process. And as more participative forms of governance have developed, activists have found themselves invited to take part within policy-making forums (Cornwell, 2004). As a result, an 'insider/outsider' analysis is increasingly hard to draw. Such a binary distinction also fails to acknowledge the position of state employees as citizens and sometimes activists. Our research suggests it is too simplistic to understand participation forums as spaces in which new discourses which 'cut across' or 'integrate' lay and official discourses are developing, in which alliances are forged or activists co-opted. There is evidence of all those things happening – as well as evidence of a 'hardening' of oppositional consciousness as a result of collective action which achieves little in terms of substantive outcomes. What is not clear is precisely why such different outcomes result and precisely how these relate to the institutional and relational contexts of deliberative forums.

Our results do not support a clear distinction between officially sponsored forums and those in which there is a dialogue between SMOs and officials in terms of outcomes relating to collective identity formation. What appears rather more important than the 'category' of

participative action is the way the purposes and methods of action are negotiated among participants, and the capacity of participants to create arenas in which dialogue can generate new meanings capable of transforming policy discourses. Within social movement theory such transformative objectives are typically understood to characterise 'new' social movements. Morris & Braine (2001) relate this to a distinction between movements constructed on pre-existing structures of domination and subordination (such as 'race' or class), and those they term 'social responsibility movements' in which activists *choose to* assume a movement identity. What our empirical findings might offer to the study of social movements may be the suggestion that, regardless of the 'type' of movement under consideration, it is important to understand the internal dynamics of interaction among participants or activists, and the way in which the style of deliberation can affect the potential for collective identity formation. Forums in which the purpose is understood as 'representing' a fixed identity may be less able to generate transformative discourses than those which emphasise the significance of exchange in constructing new meanings. This can apply both in forums comprising those whose subordinate identities are imposed, and those who have greater capacity to choose their identities.

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