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Between radical aspirations and pragmatic challenges: Institutionalizing participatory governance in Scotland

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ABSTRACT

Participatory forms of governance are increasingly institutionalised in democracies around the world. Yet, we know little about how public officials work to embed participatory governance. This article draws on a decade of mixed methods research with practitioners at the frontlines of democratic innovation. Scotland is undergoing democratic renewal through the interplay between state and civil society around three agendas: public service reform, social justice, and community empowerment. Legislation now mandates or supports participatory and deliberative processes. Scotland is thus a fruitful site to study the work of embedding participatory governance. This paper investigates tensions between radical aspirations and pragmatic challenges. Exploring participatory activism amongst officials shows the liminality of institutionalization processes, which troubles simplistic narratives about empowerment versus co-optation. The analysis shows significant but limited progress for participatory governance in Scotland. But this work is ongoing, as activist officials are developing ways of turning radical aspiration into critical pragmatism.

KEYWORDS

participatory governance;
democratic innovation;
practitioners; public officials;
institutionalization; social
justice

Introduction: from radical aspirations to pragmatic challenges

Waves of participatory experimentation kickstarted by social movements in the 1960s have been landing with varied fortunes on institutional shores. Participatory forms of governance are increasingly institutionalized in democracies around the world (Smith 2009; McNulty 2019; Elstub and Escobar 2019b; Bua and Bussu 2020). In this paper, I use the term ‘institutionalization’ to cover both the incorporation of new processes into existing institutions as well as the development of new institutions within existing systems. For example, new forms of online crowdsourcing may be put to work as part of existing consultation processes by a public authority. Or civic institutions, such as participatory budgeting or deliberative mini-publics, may be experimentally developed as new political arenas in systems of local or national governance. These three are examples from the wave of democratic innovations currently undergoing institutionalization in Scotland. This paper examines a dimension that remains underexplored, namely, the perspective of public officials

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working to institutionalize participatory governance (but see Forester 2009; Cooper and Smith 2012; Bherer, Gauthier, and Simard 2017; Blijleven, Van Hulst, and Hendriks 2019).

In the winter of 2010, I interviewed Fiona McNeil,¹ a government official whose job was to build a new institution for participatory governance across a Scottish local authority with a population nearing 100,000. The new institution was called a Community Planning Partnership (CPP) and national legislation mandated one per local authority, with the remit of enabling cross-sector collaboration, public participation, and community empowerment across a broad portfolio of policy programmes (e.g. economic development, poverty, equalities, transport, health, safety, housing, environment). I first heard about CPPs when I met Fiona and her team two years earlier at a public forum. Their stories inspired the focus for my doctoral research: understanding the political work of official public engagement practitioners at the frontlines of democratic innovation.

Born and raised in Scotland, Fiona had spent two decades travelling the world, first working in international development and then as a community organizer in feminist and rural struggles in the context of a broader revolutionary movement in Latin America. It was learning from testimonies like this that directed my attention to the work of public engagers. Vignette 1 pieces together interview fragments illustrating Fiona's autobiographical account of her transition from social movement activism and grassroots organizing to institutionalizing participatory governance in Scotland.

Vignette 1. From community organizing to institution building (extracts from a 2010 interview with a public engagement official)

I'd been travelling and been through quite some rough experiences and come face to face with injustice ... I quickly got into the women's movement, as there we were in the 1980s ... It was very difficult, we were pushing agendas about women's empowerment and participation, which had not been very well dealt with up until then in the revolution ... So we had to invent our own methodologies ... building our social movement with women's organizations from all of Latin America.

I was working in rural areas ... confronting the really dire poverty that people were living in ... And I wasn't really equipped for that, but I was working with others ... so it was like a fast-learning curve and then the political situation changed ... So that meant, you know, being in confrontation all the time ... I worked a lot on institutional development and that's still really relevant here [in Scotland]. A lot of the discussions ... about helping community organizations to develop so that they can be equal partners is crucial as well ...

When I came back to Scotland I was writing to my friends in Latin America and saying ... it's just so amazing to see this kind of policy stuff coming out of government where you feel you're on the right side, they are speaking the same language ... for example around community empowerment and engagement ... And while it is one thing to have the policies and the other is to make that shift ... you know, you've got something to hold on to, 'you've said this, this is our direction' ... I could see it when I came back ... that there was a number of building blocks ... that set Scotland on a path which I think is about, you know, a modern democracy.

Conversations with practitioners like Fiona troubled my preconceptions about public officials. Learning about the work of participatory activists working within institutional spaces challenged my simplistic understanding of the state and the role of officials in institutionalizing participatory governance. Fiona's story illustrated the range of beliefs and experiences that she brought to her role. It was untenable to assume that as a public official she would overlook the risks of state co-option or give up her activism against power inequalities. Fiona did not stop being a participatory

activist the moment she transitioned from a social movement to a public institution. Why has it then become accepted wisdom to suspect that official participatory processes are by default tokenistic?

In this paper, I draw on a mixed methods research portfolio spanning ten years and including in-depth ethnographic accounts, qualitative interviews, and quantitative surveys. The three main contributions of this article are a) to illustrate the relevance of investigating the work of practitioners of democratic innovation; b) to offer insights about the institutionalization of participatory governance; c) and to reflect on how practical challenges can turn radical aspirations into critical pragmatism. In doing so, this paper contributes to a growing body of research about how public officials, including participatory activists, try to ‘work the spaces of power’ (Newman 2012).

The next section will set the context of democratic innovation in Scotland, which will provide the backdrop to outline the research methodology. The remaining sections will share insights into the pragmatic challenges confronted by public engagement officials, followed by their perspectives on the current state of participatory governance across Scotland. After illustrating how the dilemmas that shape their role can contribute to reproduce or challenge the status quo, the paper concludes with reflections on the implications of this empirical research.

Policy context: two decades of democratic reform and innovation in Scotland

The re-opening of the Scottish Parliament in 1999 represented a watershed moment for the country, with a strong civil society and the prospect of developing new democratic institutions. In the ensuing two decades there have been numerous initiatives that seek to develop more participatory forms of governance, particularly at the local level.

By international standards, local government in Scotland has regional size: over five million people are served by 32 local councils. Scotland has the largest average population per basic unit of local government of any developed country (Keating 2010). Alongside England, Scotland has some of the lowest voter turnout at local elections in the European Union and these democratic deficits have led to warnings about a ‘silent crisis of local democracy’ (Bort, McAlpine, and Morgan 2012). Over the last two decades, various participatory governance spaces have been developed, including Community Planning Partnerships, to address the disconnect between local communities and institutions.

This institutional landscape is unreflective of social attitudes towards public participation. For example, a survey suggested that only 35% of Scottish citizens feel part of how decisions affecting their community are made and that 77% would get more involved in their community if it was easier to participate in decisions that affect it (Ipsos MORI 2014). In the 2016 wave of the Scottish Social Attitudes Survey, 80% of respondents said that people should be involved in deciding how money is spent on local services; and 96% said that people should be involved in making decisions about how local services are planned and run (Marcinkiewicz, Montagu, and Reid 2016.). There is also a growing, vibrant civil society² organized in social enterprises, community development trusts, housing associations, transition towns, charities and so on (e.g. Henderson, Escobar, and

Revell 2020). More broadly, survey data suggests that civic participation has been on the rise: 55% in 2009; 61% in 2013; 69% in 2015 (Marcinkiewicz, Montagu, and Reid 2016.; Reid, Waterton, and Wild 2013.).

A key contributor to the current emphasis on participatory governance and democratic innovation was the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum, which reached record levels of voter turnout and public engagement with politics.³ The referendum took place in a context that had already initiated some level of institutionalization of participatory forms of governance. This had been driven by a raft of official commissions and public campaigns punctuated by national legislation and policy initiatives. Some examples will throw into relief the extent to which institutionalizing participatory governance has become a prevalent narrative across state and civil society initiatives in Scotland.

The 2011 Commission of the Future Delivery of Public Services was an influential process that reshaped public service reform across Scotland with a strong emphasis on participatory governance and community empowerment (What Works Scotland 2019). The Commission influenced the Scottish Government's National Performance Framework, which affects 125 public institutions. In parallel to these policy developments, new grassroots spaces were facilitated by established civil society organizations such as the Electoral Reform Society, the Scottish Community Development Centre, and the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations. In 2014, an independent Commission on Strengthening Local Democracy concluded that urgent reforms were needed to enable participatory governance. The recommendations were endorsed by the Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, providing the support for innovations in digital engagement, participatory budgeting, and deliberative mini-publics (Escobar et al. 2018).

A key milestone was reached with the 2015 Community Empowerment Act: this legislation sought to institutionalize participatory governance through existing Community Planning Partnerships and introduced instruments such as Participation Requests (a mechanism for citizens to gain access to institutional decision-making; see Bennett et al. 2021) and new legal foundations for community ownership of public assets. The Act places emphasis on empowering people at local level, with a particular focus on tackling inequalities and socio-economic disadvantage. In parallel, the 2016–2017 Commission on Parliamentary Reform resulted in internal reforms at the Scottish Parliament, including the development of a new team of public engagement officials working on digital and deliberative innovations. In 2018, Scotland became a member of the Open Government Partnership: public institutions and civil society networks joined the global OGP programme with a strong focus on the institutionalization of participatory systems of governance.

For example, in 2018 national and local governments agreed that all local authorities will allocate at least 1% of their budgets through participatory budgeting by 2021 (Escobar et al. 2018). This follows from the rapid expansion of small-scale participatory budgeting (300 processes between 2012–2018) which is now informing the institutionalization of this democratic innovation to allocate mainstream budgets. Between 2015 and 2020, there has also been a proliferation of the use of deliberative mini-publics in institutional settings. For instance, at local level, Aberdeenshire Council has organized citizens' juries on social policies and Glasgow City Council held a citizens' assembly on

the climate emergency, while at national level the Scottish Parliament is testing the use of citizens' juries in committee work and there have been two national citizens' assemblies on climate action and the future of Scotland.

Scotland therefore offers a unique site for the study of the institutionalization of participatory governance. It constitutes a polity where experimentation with democratic innovations is at the centre of ongoing governance reforms.

More broadly, the field of democratic innovation has undergone a deliberative turn, and deliberative work is now undergoing a systemic review (Hendriks, Ercan, and Boswell 2020). However, work on deliberative systems tends to replicate a gap found in a previous generation of deliberative scholarship, namely: practices/practitioners (Escobar 2017). Sites, processes and systems are insightful foci of analysis, but we must also pay attention to the agents that carry out the practices of innovation, institutionalization, and everyday democratic repair (Hendriks, Ercan, and Boswell 2020). This article seeks to expand the analytical scope of deliberative systems in the context of participatory governance and from the perspective of practitioners tasked with turning democratic ideals into everyday policy practices. The paper is thus not focussed on *democratic innovations* i.e. the processes and institutions of participatory governance, but on *democratic innovation* i.e. the practice of developing and embedding those processes and institutions (Elstub and Escobar, 2019a).

Official public engagers working for Community Planning Partnerships constitute a key group of public servants at the frontlines of democratic innovation in Scotland. They work across a broad range of policy areas, from the environment, to regeneration, equalities, housing, planning, transport, community development, and health and social care, to name a few. They carry out the everyday work of developing local participatory governance in Scotland, at the interface of three policy agendas: public service reform, social justice, and community empowerment (Escobar et al. 2018). Yet, despite their crucial role, we know surprisingly little about this community of practice.

Mixed methods

This paper draws on mixed methods research developed since 2010. The first stage entailed two years of ethnographic fieldwork to develop a qualitative dataset including documents, images, participant observation fieldnotes (i.e. 117 meetings, 131 days of shadowing, 15 weeks of work placements) and transcripts from 44 interviews and 3 focus groups (see Escobar, 2014; 2015b). The *qualitative strand* explored three questions: How do public engagement officials design and facilitate deliberative processes? What kind of work does it take? And what kind of work does this do (i.e. what impact on institutional cultures)? The ethnographic study took place between 2010–2013.

The findings provided the foundation to develop a *quantitative strand*, thus turning the project into a *sequential* mixed methods design that widened the inquiry (Greene 2007). Building on the qualitative findings, a two-wave survey was conducted in 2016 and 2018 to study the broader network of official public engagers working for Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs) across Scotland (see Escobar, Gibb, Kandlik Eltanani, and Weakley 2018; Weakley and Escobar, 2018). The first wave provided a baseline while the second also explored the early impact of the Community Empowerment Act –new

legislation introduced in 2015 to advance participatory governance. The overall research design therefore entailed an in-depth study of everyday work by a small group of practitioners, which generated ethnographically informed propositions to be tested across a larger population. This enabled the national surveys to be based on a grounded understanding of public engagement work.

The questionnaire was co-developed by the author drawing on previous research (i.e. Audit Scotland, 2013; Cowell, 2004; Escobar, 2017, 2015b, 2015a, , 2014) and including new questions in collaboration with stakeholders from the public and third sectors (for full methodological details please see Escobar, Gibb, Kandlik Eltanani, and Weakley 2018). In the first survey there were 107 contributors, a response rate of 62% including participants from 29 Community Planning Partnerships, out of 32 across Scotland. Of the 107 participants, 39% were men and 61% women, 20% were 21–35 years old, 46% were 36–50 years old, and 36% were 51–65 years old.

The second survey was sent to an updated census of practitioners in 2018, including participants still in post from the cohort of 2016 (thus a non-probability sample). The 2018 survey reached 230 practitioners from CPPs across the country and elicited responses from 95 participants, which was lower than the 2016 sample (41% response rate). Based on the demographic profile of the 2018 cohort, which includes information on education, location, and age, the main difference between both samples is the gender breakdown. In 2018, 26% of the sample were men and 74% were women, compared to 39% men and 61% women in 2016.

There are some clear limitations across the quantitative strand. It was challenging to gather a census of practitioners working for Community Planning Partnerships across Scotland. We enlisted the help of Community Planning managers in defining their core teams, and we specified inclusion criteria to include participants who spent at least 50% of their time on Community Planning. This excludes a range of practitioners who fall below that threshold. In addition, the turnaround in the workforce meant that contact lists became quickly obsolete, particularly in areas with small Community Planning teams. While the response rate was good across both waves of the survey, there are limitations to the type of statistical analysis than can be conducted with relatively small samples. Nevertheless, in the overall mixed methods research design, the quantitative strand allowed the earlier ethnographic research to be checked for resonance across sites. This article focusses on insights derived from integrating findings across both strands of the study. The next three sections cover three dimensions of the research findings, namely: the boundary work of public engagers as they seek to institutionalize participatory governance; the culture change work at play in embedding participatory governance, as well as the risk of burnout through that work; and how public engagement officials try to make a difference.

Working the boundaries: engagement workers and institutionalization

One of the first things that struck me while shadowing officials was how often they felt out of place within the existing structures of their institutions.

The stage was set for our monthly Health Forum, and yet, the engager seemed restless. Later, while tidying up, she confided: *'this morning I had my annual job appraisal and . . . my managers don't understand my job! So many years and my role is still not clear'*. This reminded me of a manager's reply when asked what the engagers do: *'it's hard to put a finger on it, but if they weren't there it wouldn't work'*. [Fieldnotes, November 2011]

The preoccupation about their role, its context and meaning, and the appropriate ways of enacting it became salient themes across interviews and focus groups. Although community workers have long been integral to the welfare state, recent developments in UK governance (Newman and Clarke 2009; Newman 2012) have ushered a new generation of official public engagers.⁴ Despite the challenges of combining both cross-sector collaboration and public participation (e.g. Sullivan and Lowndes 2004), variations of these evolving arrangements remain central to the project of constructing 'a new set of relationships between government, communities and citizens' in the UK (Barnes and Prior 2009, 5). Public engagers, working at the nodes of such relationships, are thus becoming prominent as invited participatory spaces multiply. In this context, their role is to carve up new types of policy process:

Lorna: Our job is to engage with local people in communities to further involve them . . . in decision making in their local area . . . on things that affect them . . . And it's as broad as that because . . . is everything from health services, police, emergency services to everything that the Council does.

Alison: Yeah, we are not tied to a particular issue or a particular department or a particular service. It is a kind of weird role in a way . . . it is all about the process and about what different people are trying to achieve out of that process. [Fieldnotes, March 2012]

The surveys suggest that the majority of official engagers in Scotland are women. As Newman (2012, Location 1798) argues, boundary work is typically gendered labour, not only because women have embraced such brokering roles, but because these spaces 'emerged in part from the styles of "doing" policy and governance that had been developed by women "knitting together" people, movements and campaigns in multiple spaces of power'. Furthermore, 'their work helped generate the shifts towards more collaborative, partnership-based and participative styles of governance' (Newman 2012, Location 465). Public engagers can be seen as a new type of policy worker in Scotland, insofar as they combine the various roles mapped by the critical policy studies literature – e.g. the boundary spanner (Williams 2012), the deliberative practitioner (Forester 1999); the civic entrepreneur (Durose 2011).

The surveys provided further evidence that this kind of work does not have an established institutional space in local authorities and thus public engagers are spread across various directorates and departments. Their cross-cutting roles can unsettle established departmental boundaries, institutional functions and power dynamics (Newman 2012; Escobar 2017). During the ethnographic fieldwork, it was also apparent that this came with challenges stemming from their positionality:

Community Planning . . . is about going in and [mapping] what people need, but it's not for us to be developing and delivering that . . . whether it relates to the fire brigade, the police, the Community Education Department, Children Services, then they should follow up on that. As Community Planning Officers we are quite low down the ranking, so if we write

a Community Plan and it says that the police should do cartwheels every Wednesday, the police can look at that and go: ‘well, that’s all very well but who is going to make us do it?’ [Interview 4, 2011]

Issues around distributed authority and accountability represent a problematic dimension in participatory governance arrangements (Sullivan 2003; Sullivan and Lowndes 2004). It may be that governing narratives are now more frequently framed as a matter of collaborative networks than command-and-control hierarchies, but the engagers, despite talk of partnership, face plenty of thinking in hierarchies. In this context, relational labour becomes crucial:

... we should be good at negotiating ... and that’s easier said than done, when there is different powers involved ... in my kind of position I don’t have power over any area, so the negotiation depends on interpersonal relations, and ... I can say ‘look, this has been decided at the [Partnership] Board’ ... but the officer may not follow through ... and then if the Board doesn’t pull up on that ... it’s difficult for me, because I can try and negotiate improvements, but that is based on interpersonal relations ... [Interview 2, 2010]

As Newman shows (2012), the advent of partnership and participation has brought relational labour – ‘brokering between different power bases and actors’ (Location 222) – to the heart of policy work. In these emerging contexts, public engagers are faced with challenging ‘the old church of tradition and hierarchy, moving from an emphasis on compliance to a search for commitment through the use of “soft power”’ (Location 2312). This can be challenging: ‘border work can produce profound discomfort as different identifications – as insiders and outsiders, as both different and part of the dominant order – are lived and performed’ (Newman 2012, Location 3485). The engagers sometimes wondered whether they could do their work better if they were independent facilitators outside of the local authority. However, the ethnographic strand of this study suggests that that would prevent them from doing the backstage political work that sustains official participatory spaces, as well as the boundary work that may infuse such spaces with new power relationships (see also Escobar, 2014.).

So far, I have drawn an institutional and relational context for the engagers, illustrating how their role is not only contested but also evolving. The ethnographic strand showed how their focus on policy as process can clash with prevalent conceptions of policy as delivery. Accordingly, public engagers understand partnership and participation as process work, and thus carve up their distinct function while facing pressures to accommodate to existing institutional traditions. This highlights the importance of thinking about public engagers not just as facilitators but also as culture change workers.

Embedding participatory governance: culture change work

Since the mid 1990s, Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs) have been seen by successive governments as a key vehicle for public service reform in Scotland and, in particular, to transition towards more participatory forms of local governance (Cowell 2004; Carley 2006; Audit Scotland 2013). This means that public engagers working for CPPs must creatively draw new participatory processes onto the crowded canvas of existing bureaucratic, organizational and activist cultures (see Goss 2001; Lowndes 2005). As Durose indicates (2007, 231), frontline workers are increasingly expected to

act as civic entrepreneurs: ‘creative actors, whose role emphasizes pragmatism and negotiation and focuses on skills facilitated by local knowledge, experience and networks.’

The surveys showed a strong consensus amongst public engagers on the importance of fostering culture change in order to develop spaces for participatory governance. From the early years of Community Planning in Scotland, Abram & Cowell (2004, 213) (2004, 213) noted ‘fundamental disputes’ about its purpose and ‘the beliefs and power relations that could hold it together’. The strength of influence by the largest public sector partners (i.e. local government, health services), the ambiguous possibilities for the third and community sectors, and the new roles for elected representatives, officials and citizens, can result in spaces where ‘different operational cultures are held in suspension’ (Abram and Cowell 2004, 216; also Escobar, 2015a.). Although such liminal spaces can foster change in roles and relationships, they also present challenges:

existing arrangements of local governance . . . are deeply embedded through informal norms and conventions. When reformers attempt to introduce new institutional frameworks . . . they are faced with the equally important, but rarely recognised, task of de-institutionalising old ways of working . . . Those who benefit from existing arrangements are likely to defend the status quo; when formal change becomes inevitable, they may seek to incorporate old ways of working into new partnership structures. (Sullivan and Lowndes 2004, 67)

While seeking to understand how public engagers made sense of their work, there seem to be a spectrum ranging from more ‘administrative’ to more ‘activist’ approaches. There were public engagers on the administrative side of the spectrum, which meant taking a more bureaucratic and ‘by the book’ approach to their role. And there were those more firmly grounded on the activist side of institutionalizing participatory governance. This is not intended as a binary distinction between specific practitioners, but rather as a heuristic spectrum to make sense of different approaches to culture change work. The ethnographic strand suggested that public engagers may find themselves at different points of the spectrum depending on local context and career stage. Both surveys checked the extent to which these findings resonated across the country: 68% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that ‘it is important to sometimes bend the rules in order to make things happen’ and 77% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the notion that their job is ‘mainly administrative’ [Survey 1, n = 102–106]. This suggests a strong presence of activist approaches in this cohort of public engagers.

The second survey asked new questions about: whether public engagers felt empowered to do things both inside and outside their job description; whether they consider themselves as ‘activists’; and whether they believe that their work is administrative. 76% of the participants agreed with the statement ‘I feel empowered to do things that are in my job description’. Only 20% view their role as primarily administrative, which is relatively consistent with the findings of the similarly worded question in the 2016 survey. In 2018, a majority of respondents (59%) also report feeling empowered to do things *outside* of their job description in order to ‘get things done’ and 58% note that they see themselves as activists.

The activism of official engagers doesn’t focus on specific issues but rather on the form that policy processes take to deal with those issues – i.e. collaborative, participative and/or deliberative. Internal activists who carry out culture change work within institutions

challenge the ‘stereotypical distinctions between activist outsiders and incorporated insides’ (Newman 2012, Location 4551). The experience and position of these practitioners illustrate that it is ‘too simplistic to associate subversion solely with action outside the official sphere’ (Barnes and Prior 2009, 10). Survey respondents placed a strong emphasis on the importance of fostering culture change to create an authorizing environment for participatory governance.

The ethnographic strand of this study showed that this kind of culture change work can put practitioners under intense pressure and at risk of burning out: ‘*I don’t see myself doing this for too long*’, ‘*I just don’t know if I can carry on for much longer*’ [Focus Group 1, 2013]. They often felt ‘*overwhelmed and overstretched*’ and talked about being ‘*scarred*’ by certain experiences. There were also moments of self-questioning: ‘*I’m going through a period in which I think my work is shit and doesn’t mean anything*’. This ‘*burnout*’ was not lost to their colleagues across sectors:

Council official: If we didn’t have her driving Community Planning ... it would just be a shambles ... I don’t envy her, I think she’s got possibly one of the worst jobs in the Council, and she’s made a lot of enemies ... [Interview 14, 2012]

Community sector representative: She is between a rock and a hard place ... she sees injustice ... people who stop things from happening ... and this is the deal about power play within a Local Authority. [Interview 23, 2012]

Over time, the fire of some activist engagers would steadily dim. Some despaired for example when some of their participatory processes were rendered inconsequential by established institutions: ‘*do I want to fight to the bitter end? ... to go down all guns blazing, I don’t know, because it’s not worth it*’ [Interview 42, 2012]. In such cases, I got a sense of how the frustrations, dilemmas and struggles of the activist engager could be catalysts for more administrative approaches to the role. The data in both surveys, however, did not support the notion of widespread burnout across this community of practice in Scotland. This does not mean that burnout is not an issue, it just means that it doesn’t form a pattern. For the purposes of this article, this finding helps to understand the pragmatic challenges that can temper the aspirations of official public engagers. The next section explores the difference that public engagers try to make as they work to institutionalize participatory governance.

Making a difference through participatory governance?

Both the ethnographic and survey strands documented a wide range of participatory spaces and structures developed by public engagers working within Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs). These ranged from traditional processes such as working groups, stakeholder forums, and public meetings, to democratic innovations including online crowdsourcing, participatory budgeting, and deliberative mini-publics. The surveys found that most respondents (82%) believe that participatory governance processes influence policy and public services. The majority (76%) also reported that input from these processes is used by elected politicians. When asked about key challenges, respondents discussed public fatigue regarding inconsequential or poor-quality processes, and

aspirations for more meaningful and inclusive forms of participatory governance. Some doubted the feasibility of involving communities due to lack of resources and capacity within institutions.

Impact was a recurrent topic of discussion amongst the engagers I shadowed. They constantly questioned whether CPPs offer an effective system for participatory governance. This scepticism was shared by survey respondents, albeit they also shared examples to illustrate the added value of CPPs. These included different programmes, forums and initiatives with some tangible benefits for communities of place, identity, interest and/or practice. A large number of projects were in policy areas such as public health, community justice, employment and tackling poverty, and projects responding to the effects of public budget cuts due to austerity policies. Other respondents placed added value in the very process of co-production that leads to developing policies and services. The 2018 survey suggests that social justice has become a stronger focus in the work of public engagers, with 71% using research to understand inequalities. A salient theme of concern in both the qualitative and quantitative strands was power inequalities: the risk of participatory governance further empowering the already powerful, i.e. communities with high socio-economic capital, which can further exacerbate current inequalities (see Improvement Service, 2015 for an overview of social inequalities in Scotland). Accordingly, as a public engager put it, there is a concern about having adequate resources to be able 'to support communities in deprived areas to take full advantage of the rights given to them in the [Community Empowerment] Act'. Survey respondents valued that the Act gave rights to groups and communities to have their voices heard by public institutions –albeit some noted that this does not necessarily translate into an institutional duty to listen, deliberate, and act. Community asset transfers and participatory budgeting were brought up to highlight some of the more radical and aspirational processes enabled by the new legislation and often initiated by grassroots communities.

However, Community Planning Partnerships have remained underdeveloped assemblages for participatory governance, where public and civil society partners struggle to distribute the already limited power and resources available to local authorities in Scotland (see Escobar, Gibb, Kandlik Eltanani, and Weakley 2018; Weakley and Escobar, 2018.). In this context, fostering participatory governance entails the risk of 'bracketing social, political and organisational inequalities' which 'tends to work to the advantage of dominant groups and larger organisations, and to privilege certain forms of expertise, language and claims to legitimacy' (Newman and Clarke 2009, 60). Inclusion and diversity were central areas of concern across qualitative and quantitative findings. Public engagers worried that participatory governance processes often fail to involve a cross-section of the relevant community, which can in turn replicate existing power inequalities. This creates a vicious circle where lack of diversity and inclusion can undermine the legitimacy of participatory processes, which then hinders their impact. A lack of impact, in turn, makes such processes less appealing to citizens, hence undermining the prospects to improve inclusion and diversity.

Despite these issues, the 2018 survey showed some early positive impacts of the Community Empowerment Act, for instance propelling the spread of hundreds of participatory budgeting processes with £8 Million mobilized by 2019 and over £100 Million estimated over the next two years across local authorities (Escobar et al. 2018). The survey also indicated that there is a new cohort of elected politicians who are

improving how they work with participatory processes to inform decisions. This is therefore a critical moment for the future of participatory governance in Scotland. If some of these developments galvanize, there could be momentum to address power inequalities and build a more participatory society and economy as foundations for democratic life (e.g. Henderson, Escobar, and Revell 2020).

Conclusion: agency beyond radicalism vs pragmatism

This research has explored how public engagers work the space between the radical and the pragmatic. Officials working to embed participatory forms of governance do not operate in an institutional vacuum. The article has illustrated how culture change work proliferates across Scotland, thus suggesting widespread internal activism by public servants – a dimension that remains underexplored in democratic innovation (Escobar 2017). Their boundary work shapes the nature of their activism, which is in turn constrained by the pragmatics of liminality. Liminality, in Turner’s anthropology (Turner 1969), alludes to the ambiguous quality that characterizes the in-between space embodied during transitional periods and tribal rituals. During the liminal stage, participants stand at the threshold between what they were before the rite of passage, and what they may become afterwards. They are not here, nor there, but rather in-between worlds, traditions, and identities. More broadly, liminality can be understood as a fluid domain of action and interaction where established routines, statuses, roles and structures are renegotiated through communal practices (Turner 1987, 107). The concept has thus been used to refer to individuals, groups and societies undergoing cultural or political change (Thomassen 2009). Public engagers in Scotland operate in the liminal spaces opened by public service reform and democratic innovation. Liminality represents not only a state of ambiguity, but also of transition and creativity.

Participatory governance is often hailed as a *fait accompli* – a move from government to governance (see Davies 2011, 11–3) – that assumes that that is how things work, thus rendering invisible the work it takes. This paper has shown participatory governance not as an accomplishment, but as a contested, fragile, and evolving assemblage that takes constant political work; and that there can be more scope for manoeuvre than it is often assumed. Institutions are malleable: there is ‘a degree of path dependence but actors can shape and bend institutional forces in new directions’ (Lowndes, Pratchett, and Stoker 2006, 559). Of course, that entails struggles to reshape rules-in-use and the potential for practitioner burnout is not to be underestimated. By the same token, this highlights that public engagers can influence the ecology of local democracy. In Scotland, new participatory spaces often clash with established ways of working amongst public servants, politicians, and community representatives. Some actors see their traditional roles challenged by the new participatory gospel, backed by national policy frameworks, and practiced by the engagers across a wide range of local sites. In this light, public engagers appear as political workers advancing a culture change project ripe with tensions, ambiguities and power struggles. In that sense, the engagers’ agency forces negotiation amongst the competing understandings of democracy that collide or coalesce in participatory processes.

Participatory governance policies ‘are themselves subversive acts, designed with the express purpose of unsettling the established relationships of politicians, the public and professionals in the pursuit of new ones’ (Sullivan 2009, 65). Community Planning can be seen as a disruptive intervention that problematizes local governance in Scotland. In a study of participatory governance across England, Barnes *et al.* (2007, 184) conclude that they are ‘relatively pessimistic about the potential of new initiatives to overcome entrenched institutional or political forms of power’. This reading is appealing, but studying the work of official engagers can offer a persuasive corrective to ‘totalizing narratives that foreclose the possibilities of political agency’ (Newman 2012, Location 485).

There are different ways of being an official public engager, and the administrative/activist heuristic helps to investigate how different approaches shape, and are shaped by, their evolving ecology of participation. Accordingly, the paper illustrated the creative tension between the pressures and pleasures of agency, and how engagement work, when carried out from a commitment to culture change, can generate considerable burnout. This speaks directly to recent literature about the problems of institutionalizing ‘democracy from above’ (McNulty 2019); the importance of focussing more on the everyday practices of democratic repair (Hendriks, Ercan, and Boswell 2020); and the need to shift attention from citizen activation to citizen empowerment (Hammond 2020; Henderson, Escobar, and Revell 2020).

The paper has shown that public engagers tend to have a strong commitment to making a difference through internal activism towards culture change. As key liminal actors in the experimental theatres of democratic innovation, they face a number of structural, cultural and pragmatic challenges. But that doesn’t necessarily undermine their radical aspirations, for instance, in terms of advancing community empowerment and tackling inequalities. Studying the paradoxical worlds of these practitioners throws into relief a form of critical pragmatism: an approach to participatory activism that seeks to remain critical without becoming cynical. This entails political work that recognises power inequalities but is not paralysed by them – a form of praxis that engages with the status quo not because it is acceptable but because it can be changed. Whether this work is enough to bring about radical or urgent changes is an open question that may best be answered retrospectively in years to come (but see Davies and Choriantopoulos 2018; Bua and Bussu 2020). This highlights the complexity and fluidity of processes that seek to institutionalize participatory governance. In doing so, the paper contributes to the growing body of research that foregrounds agency and process, and thus eschews discourses that foreclose the possibility of generating alternative futures.

Notes

1. All names of people and places are pseudonyms. For more information see Escobar, 2014.
2. See for example the Scottish Community Alliance <http://www.scottishcommunityalliance.org.uk> and Senscot <https://senscot.net>.
3. Scottish Parliament data on turnout for all elections 1997 – 2011: http://www.parliament.scot/Electionresults/2011%20election/5_Turnout_Region.pdf.
4. I use this neologism to avoid reciting the official titles of the engagement practitioners profiled here (e.g. Community Planning Officer, Neighbourhood Partnership Officer, Public Involvement Coordinator). The ambivalence of the term ‘public engager’ encapsulates two key characteristics: they work in the public sector, and their job is to engage publics.

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