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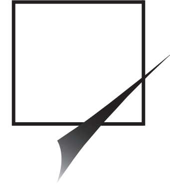

Conceptual, Theoretical and Practical Issues in Measuring the Benefits of Public Participation

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Among parliamentary democracies there is a widespread belief that above and beyond the occasional opportunity to vote, citizens should be allowed to participate in decisions that affect them. Governments at all levels are now going further and supporting more active forms of citizenship in which various decision processes are open to more public participation. While this principle may be widely accepted, the practice has remained remarkably free from empirical scrutiny. For something that is held to deliver a myriad of benefits, we still know little of the extent to which these are in fact delivered. This article addresses this gap by developing a framework for conducting more robust empirical scrutiny of participatory exercises. It does so at three levels: first by proposing a conceptual clarification of the perceived benefits of greater participation, second by considering some of the methodological challenges in designing more robust evaluative studies and finally by reviewing measures that might be used in practice to quantify benefits.

KEYWORDS: evaluation methods; measures of impact; public participation concepts

Introduction

Among parliamentary democracies and other representative systems of government there is a widespread belief that above and beyond the occasional opportunity to vote for national, regional and local governments, citizens should be allowed and indeed encouraged to participate more directly in decisions that affect them (Beetham, 1994). This belief is enshrined in Article 21 of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948) and is espoused by governments of most political persuasions. However, while this principle of extra-representative engagement may be widely accepted, the practice of public participation has remained remarkably free from empirical scrutiny, especially in

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comparison with the study of voting behaviour and patterns, party formation and political group membership. For something that is held to be so important and to deliver a myriad of benefits, we know little of the extent to which the benefits of public participation are in fact delivered or of the balance of these benefits with any costs.[1]

Of course the practice of political engagement beyond the ballot box takes many forms. These include membership of political parties, self-help, community and pressure groups; participation in ad hoc protests and lobbying efforts; and making submissions as part of national, regional or local policy-making processes (Parry et al., 1992). Increasingly though, members of the public are being invited to participate in structured processes of engagement, usually by government officials at various levels. These range from national forums down to highly local events; from exercises in devolved decision-making to information-giving sessions, and from small to large gatherings of people (Miessen and Basar, 2006; Nagy et al., 1994).

Nevertheless, despite the growing popularity of these forms of political engagement, we still do not know as much as we might about their impact. Indeed, in a recent systematic review of studies of community engagement in area-based initiatives most studies reported either evidence of negative impacts or that it was difficult to tell what the objectives of the interventions were, let alone their impact (Burton et al., 2004).

Why is this so? I have suggested elsewhere (Burton et al., 2006) two possible reasons for this lacuna: a preoccupation with rights-based conceptions of participation that eschew empirical scrutiny and a more practical set of difficulties associated with designing appropriate and rigorous evaluation frameworks. I struggle to fully appreciate the position adopted by those who not only take the 'right to participation' as self-evident and an article of faith, but go further and suggest that empirical scrutiny of the exercise and impact of that right in some way calls into question that right, but it is a position I have encountered on numerous occasions when presenting the argument contained in this article.[2] In respect of the practical difficulties of evaluating the impact of participation, I believe there is a rather less contentious way forward and in this article I want to explore further some conceptual, methodological and practical issues in developing better frameworks for evaluating the impact of participation. As many systematic reviews of evaluations of complex interventions have found, a major problem lies in the paucity of methodological and research design description (Petticrew and Roberts, 2006). Again, in our systematic review of evaluations of participation in area-based initiatives we found that many studies said little or nothing about the design of their research or their methods of collecting and analysing data. For these reasons I believe there is a clear need for more robust, relevant and reliable frameworks for evaluating the impact of participation.

The article begins by addressing at some length a number of conceptual facets of public participation in the belief that, without a reasonable degree of conceptual clarity about the evaluand, any subsequent practical measures would be built on shaky foundations. In particular it addresses four sets of questions: what are the

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apparent benefits of participation; who gets to participate; what is the scope of decision-making that the public is to participate in; and what are the terms of participation? The article then critically reviews the ways in which many apparent evaluations of public participation are designed and which methodologies they adopt before moving on to the third and final strand in which a range of practical measures of the impact of participation are reviewed.

Conceptual

As the papers collected in Beetham (1994) demonstrate, there are considerable difficulties with any attempt to measure democracy – its extent, its durability, its comparative standing and its impact. This is not to say that these difficulties are insurmountable or that the exercise is futile, but simply that we should be aware of them if we are to develop some reasonable foundations for improving our understanding of democracy in practice.

These difficulties include taking proper account of cultural variations which give different meanings and emphases to democracy, distinguishing between the explanatory and evaluative purposes of measurement and recognizing the limits of quantitative analysis where precise scores are derived from subjective value judgements made about aspects of democracy like civil liberties (Beetham, 1994: 3). In this respect measuring democracy requires the same approach as the measurement of any social or political phenomenon – a reasonably clear definition of what is to be measured prior to the development of measurement tools. It is always difficult to measure something that is only vaguely specified at the outset. Some have argued that we face similar obstacles in trying to measure public participation (Burton, 2004). We need to be as clear as possible about what we understand by public participation – in particular how its benefits are conceptualized – before we can construct appropriate measures of its impact.

The Benefits of Participation

Although public participation is seen by many as a self-evident civil or human right, it is also believed to be something that generates a number of tangible, substantive benefits. Richardson (1983) provides a helpful framework for understanding these putative benefits. She distinguishes between the developmental benefits that attach mainly to the individuals who participate and the instrumental benefits associated with the decisions or policies made as a result of more participation.

The developmental strand includes at least five benefits. First, participation is seen as a way for us to acquire, retain or enhance our dignity and self-esteem in ways that cannot be achieved by other means. By encouraging us to get involved in decisions about matters that affect our own lives, the state (in this case) is confirming that we are valuable and valued members of society with something worthwhile to contribute. It represents an important manifestation of the principle that all citizens in a democracy are in some respects equal, in this case in our notional capacity to make a worthwhile contribution through participating in civil society or civic affairs. If we are denied this right or discouraged from exercising

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it, then a powerful message is conveyed about our civic worth which suggests instead a more passive role in which we have little of value to contribute to public life except for our participation in the periodic election of our leaders.

The second benefit draws on this and lies in the educative role played by participation. By participating in one aspect of public life we become more self-confident in our ability to take greater control over other aspects of our lives. As more active participants we learn that we can make a valued contribution on many fronts and become more rounded citizens as a result. We also learn of the complications and complexity of public decisions and the difficulties faced by those responsible for making them. Barber (1984: 448) captures this well in suggesting that

> . . . civic activity educates individuals how to think publicly . . . Politics becomes its own university, citizenship its own training ground and *participation* its own tutor. (Emphasis added)

The third benefit also has an educative element as it assumes that only through participating in public debates and decision-making will we develop a more complete understanding of our own real interests. As passive citizens we are prey to others, including our formal representatives, saying what is best for us. As active and participating citizens we are obliged to think more carefully about our preferences and priorities and about our values and beliefs and to temper these in the light of public debate.

Richardson's fourth benefit relates to identity and expression. It is claimed that only by participating are we able to express important aspects of our identity – for example, as green radicals, as conservatives or as Welsh nationalists. This is not to say that these shorthand labels of our identity are necessarily fixed – the third benefit suggests that they may well change in the course of participating – but simply that participation provides an opportunity for us to give expression to relevant aspects of our identity or as Barber (1984: 449) puts it, 'In strong democratic politics, participation is a way of defining the self . . . '

The final developmental benefit relates more to the social than to the individual sphere and claims that by participating we become more sociable and at the same time contribute to a greater sense of social integration, social cohesion or social solidarity. In short, greater participation stimulates community development or, as Barber again suggests, 'Community grows out of participation and at the same time makes participation possible' (1984: 448). But of course this relies on participation taking a social form – the public meeting or focus group or consensus conference for example – rather than its more individualistic forms, such as responding in isolation to a questionnaire survey or completing a comment sheet after a participatory event.

Turning to the instrumental strand of the substantive case for participation, it is claimed that participation improves the quality of decisions made in terms of both managerial efficiency and political legitimacy. Managerial efficiency is achieved as greater involvement brings with it a wider range of relevant views about the conception of problems, the scope of solutions and the definitions of success.

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It is recognized that the involvement of more people and the incorporation of their views may well mean that decisions take longer to make, but it is claimed that they will be the better for it and that any short-term costs will be offset by longer term benefits. A UK White Paper on local government (DTLR, 2001: 20) captured this very well in saying: 'Effective community engagement leads to better decisions and better implementation. Community involvement is a key component of best value.' It is claimed also that the political legitimacy of specific decisions increases as more people are party to those decisions and that the legitimacy of the overall system of decision-making or government is enhanced – as more people participate they are drawn into accepting the operating principles or rules of that decision-making system and hence bolster its legitimacy.

Using these notional benefits as a starting point, we can now move on to consider three further important questions which help to clarify the conceptualization of participation: who should participate; at what level of decision-making and in what relationship to those with formal decision-making responsibility?

Choice and Selection

In considering the question of who should be entitled to participate, it is worth beginning with the most extreme case and considering why it should be anything other than everyone. However, in practice we will rarely mean everyone and there is always likely to be some limitation. The most obvious might be through the imposition of a spatial boundary, perhaps associated with a national, regional or local jurisdiction that limits the related entitlement to vote in elections for the relevant government. We might also understand that everyone in practice means everyone with the status of citizen, in other words we might feel justified in excluding those without the right to vote in local, regional or national elections such as children or those without citizenship. The point is not to advocate any particular criteria of inclusion or exclusion, but to highlight the importance of recognizing their existence and appreciating the implications of including or excluding any particular group. For example, it may be considered perfectly reasonable to exclude young people of primary school age from a participatory exercise about the development of regulations for the financial services sector but not from an exercise about how to deal with bullying in schools.

But what of the inclination or indeed the capacity of citizens to participate? Some may not be interested in participating in a particular debate, feeling that it is of no great consequence to their lives, while others may feel they know so little about an issue that their contribution to any public debate would be worthless. Related to this is the question of any corresponding civic responsibilities, such as a duty to vote or to participate or simply to be an active and concerned citizen. In the UK, the Home Office has for some years been committed to promoting active citizenship and even set itself a target of achieving a 5 percent increase in measured levels of civic activity. A more nuanced position might therefore acknowledge that not every citizen will *choose* to participate in every, or indeed any public decision-making process that is open to them and that there may be

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valid reasons for choosing not to do so. The enforcement of a civil obligation to participate feels rather uncomfortable to many, although some have argued for versions of this obligation to be enforced as it is in Federal elections in Australia (Watson and Tami, 2001).

Alongside the issue of choice is that of *selection*. Those responsible for managing participatory exercises are also faced with the question of who they should select to participate if it is not to be everyone in a given constituency. Various criteria could be applied in making selections. For instance, the value of organizing around enthusiasms (Bishop and Hoggett, 1986) might be used to select only those who are sufficiently motivated and interested to put themselves forward. The capacity or willingness to listen to a variety of alternative positions before coming to a view might also be used to exclude those with prior and unalterable viewpoints in the same way that biased or prejudiced citizens might be excluded from a trial jury. One might select only those with a certain level of knowledge or experience of an issue. Moreover, more than one criterion might be applied, so that participants had not only to be interested but also knowledgeable in order to qualify for selection.

Finally, the principle of random selection might be adopted on the grounds that it is inherently fair in avoiding bias during selection. It was used as one of the criteria in filling positions of public office in ancient Athens and has long been used in the selection of jurors for criminal trials. It serves as the basis for distributing substantial sums of money through national lottery schemes and has also been used for over half a century in drawing unbiased and representative samples for social survey research. Although random methods of selection ensure everyone has an equal chance of selection, this says nothing about the capacity or ability of those selected to participate (Burnheim, 1985). Opinions on the salience of capacity to participate are divided. On the one hand Arblaster describes an optimistic view of civic capacity in saying, 'political wisdom is not a matter of specialised knowledge, but something in which everyone has a share' (1987: 21), while on the other Schumpeter has spoken of the 'proven ignorance, irrationality and apathy of the people' (Arblaster, 1987: 53). Thomas Jefferson's solution to this problem remains apposite:

> I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education. (Peterson, 1984)

In summary, it is perhaps most important to recognize that reasonable and respectable arguments can be put forward for a variety of different selection principles. These principles can entail the selection of anything from all members of a particular constituency, through many to only a few. Thus, when it comes to evaluating the success of participatory initiatives we must ensure that we are applying the relevant criteria of success rather than assuming a greater number of participants is always better than fewer.

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Levels or Scope of Decision

Decisions vary in terms of the extent of their significance and impact and we can conceive of this variation as a continuum. At one end of the continuum are decisions that affect everyone in a particular constituency or jurisdiction, while at the other end are those affecting only a few. We can label these extremes as strategic (affecting all) and individual (affecting few) and define a point in between as programmatic where the impact of a decision is felt by an intermediate grouping somewhere between the many and the few. This continuum can exist both within and across spatially nested constituencies so that a strategic decision could apply to a neighbourhood, a city of which it is a part, a region of which it is a part and a country of which it is a part and so on. A similar way of conceiving this continuum is to distinguish between decisions about constitutional matters (for example, who to include and the broad terms of engagement), about policy matters (for example, principles of entitlement) and about the application of constitutional or policy decisions to specific cases (for example, should I be granted a particular welfare benefit?).

The significance of this conceptual continuum is threefold. First, as the number of people affected by a decision increases, so there is a corresponding increase in the number who can claim a right to participate in the making of that decision on the basis of being affected by it. Other things being equal, this increases the likelihood that not everyone will choose to exercise this right if it is granted and, more significantly, that a smaller sample of people will be selected to participate. The political challenge is to be able to justify the criteria for selection and hence instances of non-selection.

Secondly, strategic level decisions affecting the many often serve to constrain lower level decisions. In this sense they often contribute to the rules of games played at lower levels and may therefore be important in influencing the outcomes of subsequent participatory exercises. For example, subregional land use plans determine the total requirement of land for new housing developments and identify areas for growth. District level plans then identify particular sites and finally individual planning applications are determined on the basis of specific residential patterns and house designs. While an individual application may be rejected on the basis of design, the case for growth will already have been accepted at a prior and more strategic stage.

Thirdly, the actual significance of strategic level decisions often appears to be inversely related to popular perceptions of their impact and hence to the propensity to participate. Thus, people are sometimes more inclined to participate, whether by unfettered choice or following an invitation, in small-scale and parochial decision-making exercises than in broader and more strategic arenas, the significance of which to their everyday life may not be readily apparent. Managers of participatory exercises have long struggled to present strategic choices in ways that are comprehensible to the large populations affected and stimulate popular interest and excitement. In contrast, very localized proposals (to close a school or post office or to open a residential home for recovering drug addicts for

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example) often generate intense local interest and participation through public meetings and the signing of petitions.

Participatory Relationships

The third strand refers to the nature of the participatory relationship, or the relationship between those people who choose to or are invited to participate and those who retain formal responsibility for making the decision in question. At one end of the spectrum formal responsibility for taking a decision is handed to all participants, for example in a referendum, while at the other end participants are allowed only the most cursory degree of involvement and in ways that have no meaningful impact on the decision taken. Arnstein's (1968) ladder was the first and remains the most commonly cited conceptual representation of this spectrum, but others have offered variations on this theme (Burns et al., 1994)

The most significant criticism of Arnstein's ladder and subsequent variations is that it embodies a set of normative assumptions about the relative merits of the ends of the spectrum, without fully articulating and justifying them. Thus it is assumed that delegating the power of decision-making to the people (however defined and delineated) is not only a good thing, but a better thing than simply asking 'the people' to choose between a predetermined set of options. This assumption only holds for certain models of democracy, typically those rooted in the participatory conceptions of Barber, Pateman and Hirst or further back in the work of Mill or Rousseau. In alternative conceptions, seen in the work of Schumpeter or Sartori and in Burke's notion of representation, popular participation does not serve as a yardstick for democracy and if anything signifies the potential for wasteful or even oppressive political activity.

Thus, while we might accept the notion of a spectrum of participatory relationships, we do not need to link this with any assumption of relative value or merit. Moreover, the number of points on this spectrum may be large or small depending on the preferred degree of sophistication or simplicity of the model.

Combinations

When we think about the foundations of any rigorous evaluation of schemes to enhance public participation in policy and decision-making, we must remember these alternative conceptions and the various combinations that are possible. Too often evaluations begin from the premise that greater participation is self-evidently beneficial and hence anything that falls short of some ideal but unspecified level of maximal participation is by definition flawed. This is, in my view, misguided and unhelpful.

Some of the possible combinations of the three strands described are more interdependent and hence more significant than others. For example, if the level of decision is strategic it will necessarily affect more people than an individual case decision and hence will heighten the political significance of selecting and justifying who should participate. As more people participate the direct costs (for example, measured in cash and time) of participation tend to increase as do the costs of analysing the likely variety of responses, the costs of managing the

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process and the costs of arriving at a consensus or at a preferred position.[3] Thus, each particular combination carries with it the essential elements of its evaluation and we would do well to remember that there can be no simple overarching evaluative framework that would suit each case.

Methodological

Having set out the basis for establishing firmer conceptual foundations for any evaluation of public participation we can turn now to the task of developing a more robust methodological framework. In thinking about how to test the assumptions I have described we cannot avoid engaging in broader debates about social research methods and social science methodologies. The continuing arguments between experimentalists, realists and constructivists are especially relevant, but the scope for doing justice to the full range of that debate in this article is limited.[4]

However, as a recent systematic review of studies of public participation in area-based initiatives (Burton et al., 2004) makes clear, most adopt a loose qualitative approach and rely on case-study methods. Although these approaches are not necessarily constructivist in design and methodology, it is clear that many of these studies rely on the perceptions and beliefs of key actors about the beneficial impacts of participation to the virtual exclusion of any more objective measures. More generally, much research on public participation takes the form of practice stories (Hummel, 1994) which describe how the anticipated benefits of participation are thwarted by a succession of obstacles. These obstacles range from the wilful manipulation of participatory processes by cynical gatekeepers through to the poor planning skills of those responsible for engaging effectively with a wide range of people in a short period of time. Practice stories of participation are therefore interesting and much can be learned from them (Kushner, 2000; Sandercock, 2003). But because effective participation is so rarely achieved in practice, we found few studies that take de facto success as their starting point and go on to measure and assess more systematically its impact or even to tell practice stories of success. In contrast to studies taking the form of practice stories, we found very few empirical studies of the impact of participation and those found were more diverse in their methodology, research design, policy focus and scale. It is much more difficult as a consequence to aggregate data from these studies and perform any secondary analysis on larger data sets or even to synthesize their findings into a relatively consistent and coherent picture of impact.

I shall briefly review a selection of these empirical studies drawn both from our systematic review and from an extension of that review. They provide a useful guide to the methodological challenges of designing more robust, relevant and reliable frameworks for evaluating the impact of public participation.

Empirical Studies of Impact

Halvorsen (2003) set out to measure the effect of participation in 'good quality' participatory exercises in the work of the US Forest Service and looked in particular

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for heightened feelings of trustworthiness and responsiveness. She concluded that participation in 'good quality events' did indeed provoke favourable responses among participants. They were more inclined to believe that the public agencies in question cared about their views and were more responsive to them; they were more likely to trust public bodies in general; and they were more tolerant of the views of others, even if they disagreed with them. There were, however, acknowledged flaws in the research design of this study, including a small sample size (13 meetings and 181 attendees in total) and an inability to directly compare pre- and post-event responses, which led to difficulties in drawing very robust general conclusions. They are nevertheless, consistent with findings on the transformation of participants into more tolerant and public-spirited citizens.

Julian et al. (1997) attempted to measure the relationship between different degrees of participation and feelings of empowerment among participants in the setting of local United Way projects in the USA. Again a relatively small sample size ($n = 101$) coupled with problems of sample contamination meant that their conclusions were heavily qualified. Similar limitations affected a study of the operation of district assemblies in Tameside, UK, by Yeomans and Adshead (2003) who administered a questionnaire to 69 residents attending local assembly meetings. Although their data showed that participants were in the main positive about their experiences, they were obliged to conclude that broader aspects of power were probably more significant in determining the effectiveness of this particular form of participation.

Burby (2003) examined the relationship between participation in the form of 'stakeholder involvement' and the impact of plans, measured in terms of their strength and likelihood of implementation. Drawing on evidence from 60 instances of local government plan-making in the states of Washington and Florida, he set out to answer three questions: does more involvement lead to stronger plans; does it also lead to more effective implementation; and do planners' choices about involvement actually affect the extent of stakeholder participation? In broad terms, the answer to each question is yes and Burby concludes that this study provides a valuable empirical supplement to the more typical case-study analysis of the impact of participation. It is also worth noting his simple but powerful conclusion that merely inviting a wider range of people and groups to participate is likely to secure many of these benefits. While this study has a reasonably large sample size, it can be criticized for the measures it uses of plan strength and implementation. Although reliability tests were employed, the measures (of implementation in particular) remain relatively crude and do not distinguish readily between degrees of implementation.

Burby's paper reports on a larger study that is also described by Brody et al. (2003). This analysed the extent to which a legal or political obligation to promote participation (a citizen involvement mandate) was effective in securing good participatory practice. Drawing on the same data as Burby, they conclude that a mandate does help, but is most effective when allied to a system of incentives. They also note that those responsible for managing participatory exercises make choices that have a bearing on the tenor and practice of the exercise. In other

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Table 1. Criteria for Evaluating Public Participation Exercises

Acceptance criteria		*Process criteria*	
Representativeness	Participants should comprise a broadly representative sample of the affected population	**Resource**	Participants should have access to sufficient resources to enable to fulfil their brief as participants
Independence	The process should be conducted in an independent and unbiased way	**Task definition**	Participatory tasks should be clearly defined
Early involvement	The public should be involved at the earliest possible stage in the process	**Decision structure**	The decision process should be clearly structured and be capable of being displayed clearly
Influence	The outcome of the exercise should have a genuine impact on policy	**Cost effectiveness**	The procedure should in some sense be cost-effective
Transparency	The process should be sufficiently transparent so that decision process is clear to all		

Source: adapted from Rowe and Frewer (2000).

words they have some capacity to influence the degree to which participation is a meaningful and valuable exercise for both participants and for those who retain the ultimate responsibility for making planning decisions.

In addition to these empirical studies, a small number of papers have approached the methodological questions of evaluating public participation in a more systematic manner. Rowe and Frewer (2000) offer one of the most extensive sets of proposals in their framework for assessing participation methods in which they elaborate a set of evaluation criteria. They distinguish between acceptance and process criteria and these are described in more detail in Table 1 above.

This schema represents an admirable attempt to bring much needed clarity to the evaluation of participatory methods and in many respects it succeeds in doing so. But it is not without its flaws. In proposing a set of criteria it exposes some uncertainties in the basic assumptions made of participation and its benefits that we have already considered. For example, the criterion of representativeness begs the question – representative of what? Rowe and Frewer focus on 'affected populations' and notwithstanding the difficulties associated with defining this with sufficient clarity, fail to consider the question of inclination and motivation to participate. They simply assume that anyone affected by a proposal will want to participate and make no reference to the long-standing distinction between the right and the duty to participate.[5] They also acknowledge some of the other practical difficulties of balancing quantity of participants with quality of participation

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and the financial costs of obtaining large enough samples of participants in order to generalize to a larger population.

Rowe and Frewer also tend to gloss over the difficulties of achieving the requisite degree of independence among those charged with managing and orchestrating participatory events. This is related to the much broader question of the extent to which satisfaction with process is linked to satisfaction with outcome in the minds of participants. Although there is little or no evidence available to support this, it might nevertheless be reasonable to assume that people often feel dissatisfied with the process in cases where the outcome is one with which they disagree. This has important implications when it comes to applying any evaluative criteria that rely on subjective measures of satisfaction among participants.

Rowe and Frewer go on to apply these criteria in assessing a variety of participatory methods and techniques, relying largely on their own opinions when making these assessments. The methods include referenda, public hearings, consensus conferences, opinion surveys, advisory committees and focus groups. They conclude that it is impossible to declare categorically that any one method is best and that the 'horses for courses' principle is probably the most sensible to apply. They also refer to a common confusion about what is meant by 'effectiveness' in relation to participatory methods and are eminently sensible in acknowledging that their framework is a step in the direction of devising more rigorous tools for measuring effectiveness and not the last word on the subject.

Another valuable contribution to the development of more effective methodologies for evaluating participation is provided by Chess (2000). Her discussion of methodological questions in the evaluation of environmental participation programmes opens with a quotation from the US National Research Council to the effect that there is little systematic knowledge of what works in public participation and deliberation. Although Chess claims that the evaluation of participation in environmental policy-making is inherently more complex than for social programmes due to the scientific complexity of environmental issues, this is not especially convincing and no clear evidence is presented to support the proposition. However, her distinction between summative, formative and impact evaluations is more useful and serves as a helpful dimension in constructing a typology of key questions about the evaluation of participatory exercises, including why evaluate, when, who should do it and how?

Chess concludes by advocating methodological pluralism and calling for a more systematic approach to the collection of relevant data during the routine operation of participatory exercises. This is also the conclusion of a review by Delli Carpini et al. (2004) in which they argue that the most important factor affecting the impact of deliberative forms of politics is context and that multiple methods should be used that combine the strengths of qualitative case studies, participant observation, survey research and field-based experimentation.

In short there continues to be significant methodological debate around the best way to frame evaluations of public participation. It is evident from reviews of the literature that constructivist methodologies and case-study methods underpin

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many evaluation studies of public participation initiatives, but there is a growing body of work that draws on experimental designs and various quantitative forms of analysis. Rather than being drawn into well-worn debates about the relative merits of qualitative and quantitative approaches, a more productive way forward lies in the possibility of a synthesis of these approaches. In a similar vein to one of the more valuable aspects of the realist approach to evaluation (Pawson and Tilley, 1997), it is possible to combine the contextual value of practice stories developed from a constructivist perspective with more empirically focused and experimental attempts to identify more general causal mechanisms. This opens the door to a potential methodological synthesis of constructivist particularism with experimental generalizability. Without necessarily advocating a fully fledged realist approach to the evaluation of participation, we can conclude that many of the stories of participation in practice provide important contextual material on the specific circumstances and historical precedents of participation in particular settings and help in defining the scope of any more general explanatory theory. There does appear, therefore, to be some scope for synthesis in the development of both evaluation methods and research design. The next section considers some of the practical issues that arise in trying to devise valid measures of the impact of participation.

Practical

The practical challenge in constructing more robust evaluations of the impact of public participation lies primarily in the development of relevant measures of the putative benefits of participation while recognizing that measures of the costs of greater participation are also important. The quality of evaluative information in all fields is subject to increasing interest and scrutiny (Lomansky and Brennan, 2000) and the field of public participation is no different. Quality assurance schemes have long existed in implicit form through the working assumptions of professional researchers and evaluators, but they are becoming more explicit and codified in the form of standards (see e.g. the systems summarized in Schwartz and Mayne, 2005: 5) and codes of practice. Of course this does not immunize them from criticism and only has only to think of ongoing debates about the notion of a 'hierarchy of evidence' to appreciate that these are highly contested concepts and devices (Mullen, 2006; Oliver et al., 2005).

For our purposes we need to think of possible existing measures and to develop new measures of the effects of greater participation if existing ones are not fit for our purposes. Table 2 briefly summarizes the putative benefits already described and sets out some of the practical difficulties in devising measures of each.

The seven broad categories of benefit and their possible measurement are now discussed in more detail.

Self-Esteem

The first set of benefits relate to the self-esteem of participants. Self-esteem is a commonplace concept in psychology, usually held to include the related

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Table 2. The Benefits of Participation and how they Might be Measured

Benefits	*Possible measures*
Developmental	
Improved self-esteem of participants	Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory
Increased knowledge and awareness of aspects of civil and political life	Understanding of civic and political institutions, structures and processes via survey or group discussion
Increased awareness and understanding of own self-interests	Questions to participants via self-completion survey or face to face interview
An opportunity for expression of key elements of personal social identity, e.g. as socialist, conservative, feminist, internationalist, etc.	Questions to participants via self-completion survey or face to face interview
Greater social citizenship	Measures of social and political engagement e.g. GHS indicators of civic engagement
Instrumental	
Managerial efficiency:	
• Wider range of views brought to bear • Provides useful reality check • Political legitimacy • Specific decisions • Decision-making system • Whole system of governance	Records of participatory events, prior to any aggregation during consensus building Perceptions of decision-makers Survey measurement of views of political processes and systems of governance e.g. trust in politicians and in politics

components of a global sense of self-worth and more specific instances of self-confidence in particular domains (Rosenberg, 1965). Measures of self-esteem are either explicit in the sense that they rely on the direct self-reporting of the subject or implicit in that they adopt indirect measures (Blascovich and Tomaka, 1991). The earliest and still most popular measures of self-esteem, such as the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) and the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory (Coopersmith, 1981), are explicit measures. There has been a substantial growth in the number of implicit measures over the last decade but serious questions have been raised about their validity and reliability (Karpinsky, 2004).

It would be possible to use the Rosenberg scale to measure the impact of participation on self-esteem, either comparing samples with known high and low levels of participation or applying the test before and after specific instances of participation. It is debatable whether a one-off instance of participation would be sufficient, even in theory, to produce a measurable change in self-esteem and it might be more appropriate to take a more prolonged period of participation. Of course there are substantial practical difficulties in controlling for other possible influences on self-esteem, including socioeconomic status, gender, race

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and ethnicity, employment status, educational achievement and neighbourhood or residential status. Some of these are quite volatile and indeed some, such as neighbourhood status, are likely to be directly linked with the policy intervention or decision in which the person is participating.

Knowledge and Awareness

The second set of benefits relates to the political knowledge and civil awareness of participants.

Much is made nowadays of the need to better educate children and young people in the political traditions of their country and to develop their understanding of how their society is governed. Civic education has re-entered the high school curriculum in many countries and it is hoped that in the future this will provide a stronger foundation on which to build a more active citizenry. In the mean time, surveys of the state of current political awareness suggest that most of us remain only dimly aware of the nature and function of many of our key civil institutions (although to be fair, some change with a rapidity that can leave even professional researchers struggling to keep up to date!).

Unless comparatively expensive before-and-after studies of those who participate are undertaken, we must rely on more limited comparisons of specific populations of new participants with samples drawn as part of previous studies, such as those surveyed by the UK Home Office as part of its regular Citizenship Survey and the General Household Survey conducted by the UK Office for National Statistics. These surveys include some question modules devoted to the level and nature of public participation in local decision-making, perceptions of neighbourliness, social networks and social support.

Broadly speaking it would appear from these surveys that levels of political knowledge and awareness are not especially high, with few people able to name their elected representatives (national or local) and many unclear about the division of responsibility between local authorities, National Health Service bodies and the growing number of local partnerships and QUANGOs. The baseline against which to measure any increase in knowledge is therefore likely to be low.

Awareness and Development of own Interests

It is not self-evident what we mean when we talk of our interests in this context: whether we mean our views and opinions on particular topics or a more careful consideration of our life preferences and how they might be achieved, in other words a clear sense of what is best for us.

Advocates of deliberative forms of democratic politics have long argued that conventional surveys of public opinion typically capture the ignorance of those surveyed (Fishkin et al., 2000). Respondents are often presented with questions or statements that do not necessarily reflect their everyday concerns and are invited to answer with little chance for reflection. Interviewers (assuming the survey is conducted in a face-to-face manner) are usually instructed not to engage in any discussion of the meaning of the question in order to minimize the risk of bias. Deliberative forms of opinion polling, and of course there are many, start

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from a markedly different position in which the very purpose of the exercise is to encourage dialogue or what Coleman (2004) calls 'polyogue', in order to arrive at a more considered and thoughtful statement of one's interests.

It is likely then that a deliberative approach would be more appropriate as a means of gauging change than a simple before-and-after snapshot based on more traditional opinion measuring devices. The increasing use of digital recording devices also allows the intervening debates and deliberations in groups to be captured more effectively for later analysis when some of the processes of opinion formation and change might become more visible.

Opportunity to Express Key Elements of Personal Identity

How might we go about measuring participants' satisfaction with the opportunity to use the participatory event to express key elements of their personal identity? In this case we are concerned mainly with personal identity that is associated with membership of some larger group of like-minded or otherwise similar people, be they members of a political party, social movement or ethnic group. Apart from using the crude device of observing the extent and nature of obvious displays of identity in the form of t-shirts, lapel badges or caps emblazoned with identity slogans, we would need again to speak with participants about the importance they attach to displaying – visually or verbally – important aspects of their identity. This could be achieved individually through an interview or collectively through some form of group discussion. More intensive forms of interview would also allow for greater discussion of the extent to which a participant's visible membership of a group was reinforced or challenged by the experience of participation. For example, it is possible that through a process of deliberation and exposure to new arguments, a participant lost confidence in their previous view on a topic that was closely associated with their membership of a particular group or that their views and identity were reinforced by the process.

Greater Social Citizenship

This element covers a multitude of possibilities, but as discussed earlier refers primarily to the social aspects of citizenship: the inclination to be and feel part of a social group, whether a geographically based neighbourhood or one rooted in a shared interest or identity like a community of interest. It might also refer to an active sense of membership of a political or administrative constituency, such as a local authority or a city (Young et al., 1996). Insofar as these diverse aspects can be combined into a broader concept, we might use the expression 'social capital' as a convenient shorthand although this might also raise even more problems of definition and conceptualization (Harper and Kelly, 2003). This does not, of course, solve the problem of its measurement but it does allow us to draw on attempts by others to develop appropriate measures (e.g. Jochum et al., 2005). For example, the UK Office for National Statistics has addressed this directly and proposed a framework that is consistent with similar pan-European initiatives and which comprises five elements: social participation, civic participation, social

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networks and social support, reciprocity and trust and views of the local area (Economic and Social Data Services, 2007). From this a harmonized question set has been developed for use in local and national surveys as well as a shorter set of core questions where it is not possible to use the full set.

As with the measures of more individualized benefits, the issue of correlation and causation remains a major concern when attempting to attribute any changes on these dimensions to the existence of new participatory opportunities.

Managerial Efficiency

Managerial efficiency is used in this case as a shorthand term for two different but related features: the range of different views or perspectives brought to bear on a decision and the capacity of this range of people to ensure that potentially inappropriate or 'bad' decisions are named as such and do not pass through the process by virtue of 'groupthink' (Janis, 1982; Kowert, 2002).

It is difficult to envisage the construction of precise measures of these features and their impact on public decision-making, but this should not deter us from imagining some way of trying to judge their salience. In the field of agricultural economics, Trip et al. (2002) have developed a measure of managerial efficiency that divides the whole process into four stages and draws on the assessment of a panel of experts to judge the effectiveness of managerial performance at each stage. Unfortunately for our purposes the extent to which people beyond the managerial team are involved in decision-making is not part of their analysis. Some work is currently under way to conceptualize and then measure the costs and benefits of participation (Involve, 2005) and this has included attempting to gauge the cost implications of involving more and more people in any particular decision. The main practical difficulty lies, unsurprisingly, in comparing the often tangible costs associated with greater involvement (meeting space, attendance allowances, time required, facilitation costs, etc.) with the relatively intangible benefits.

Again, it is likely that until and unless more sophisticated measures are developed, it will be necessary to rely on the subjective perceptions of those directly involved in making managerial decisions. There is certainly scope for some in-depth qualitative research with decision-makers to investigate their understanding of what 'quality of decision-making' might mean and the factors that seem to them to affect it.

Political Legitimacy

Measures of the legitimacy of particular public decisions sometimes appear easy to construct and use in practice. The media increasingly runs polls in which readers or viewers are invited to say whether they agree or disagree with a current policy proposal or a decision and political parties and others regularly commission polls of political popularity. Of course the statistical robustness of some of these surveys remains highly questionable and even surveys properly conducted by reputable survey organizations will be challenged if the answer they give is not to

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the liking of those whose decisions are scrutinized in this way. Moreover, insofar as legitimacy is associated with trust, as Rothstein and Uslaner (2005) note there is little evidence to suggest that greater participation leads to greater trust in those making decisions.

Measures of the legitimacy of specific decisions would include questionnaire surveys that directly ask respondents for their views after the event as well as the accumulation of less systematic data including media coverage. These more or less systematic measures can also be applied to gauging the perceived legitimacy of decision-making systems such as local governments, regeneration partnerships, school boards, health authorities and so on (Hope and King, 2005).

As discussed in connection with deliberative approaches to decision-making, it is important in this field to be able to contextualize the responses given in surveys with some appreciation of the respondent's knowledge of the decision system and relevant experience of it. For instance, some may claim that a particular decision-making body or process is fundamentally flawed and disreputable even though they know little about how it works in practice, or their views may be influenced by the fact that they gained or lost in some way because of a decision that the body in question had recently taken.

Conclusions

The putative benefits of public participation have for too long been shielded from the most robust forms of evaluation and judgement. This has allowed the assertion of procedural principles to supersede the demonstration of instrumental benefits in judging the value of participation and undermined the case for instituting more robust studies of the practice of participation.

The lack of conceptual clarity around the scope and form of participation and its benefits has served to impede the development of more robust evaluation research designs. These designs could usefully combine different approaches: experimental designs will be productive in some but not all cases and there will continue to be value in developing robust constructivist accounts and practice stories in other instances.

Although it has not been explored in any detail in this article, there is also scope to adopt the key principles of realist analysis in seeking to distinguish between causal mechanisms and contextual factors, even if the distinction proves difficult to maintain in particular cases. Many of the practice stories that pass as evaluations of participation initiatives can be reused as contextual factors in realist analyses – they provide rich sources for detailing the significance of local history, local political structures and local demography and should not be overlooked by those with more experimental and empirical leanings.

This practical challenge of designing appropriate evaluation frameworks highlights the sterility of some forms of the 'paradigm wars' that continue to dog the theory and the practice of evaluation. While some prefer the certainties of absolutist positions and enjoy the security of portraying the debate in black and white terms, this brief discussion has shown that a more variegated position is

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not necessarily a sign of conceptual slackness and methodological laxity, but can reflect a legitimate form of methodological and epistemological pluralism. And just as in democratic theory itself, pluralism is an accepted albeit contested position.

However, having arrived at a research design that is appropriate to the type of participatory initiative to be evaluated, we have seen that there remain substantial practical problems in devising and applying practical measures of the key variables. Some existing and widely accepted measures can be used, for example to measure changes to self esteem, but variables relating to the quality of decisions made or the legitimacy of decision-making structures are inherently more difficult to measure.

Of course further research is necessary and there are many opportunities to use the myriad of local experiments in deliberation and participation to design studies of impact which draw on and combine the methods of case study, participant observation, survey research and field-based experimentation. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002: 30) have said: 'Prescriptions about how to improve democratic government are too important to leave to the realm of wishful thinking'. Perhaps the faithful whose belief in the value of participation remains in the world of self-evident truth will allow those of us who value empirical scrutiny as well as political conviction the time to work on improving the research base of studies of the effectiveness of public participation? In this way the practice of public participation may be strengthened and its place in the pantheon of democratic principles reinforced.

Notes

1. I have chosen to use the expression public participation rather than community involvement or community engagement in this article as I believe it captures more clearly the realities of participation. Communities do not usually participate in anything; individual members of communities do. Individual participation may be organized on the basis of formal representation of a wider community, but it is not necessarily so.
2. This line of argument is also evident in various disciplines' critique of 'neoliberalism' and one aspect of its manifestation in the rise of an 'audit culture' or the growth of 'cultures of accountability'. See e.g. Dowling (2008) for a current example of this critique within the discipline of geography.
3. Involve, a London-based organization committed to promoting public participation and strengthening democracy, has recently published a review of literature on the costs of participation and is pursuing this research further (Involve, 2005).
4. Excellent contributions to these debates can be found in Pawson and Tilley, 1997, 1998a, 1998b.
5. Consider e.g. the difference between Pericles' belief in the duty to participate when insisting, 'we do not say that a man who takes no interest in politics is a man who minds his own business, we say he has no business here at all', with Lomansky and Brennan's claim that there is no plausible moral case for obliging citizens even to vote in a democracy (Lomansky and Brennan, 2000).

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