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The Rituals of Public Meetings

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Public meetings are often referred to as “rituals” to denote a largely symbolic activity with little concrete meaning. This essay explores how public meeting rituals may produce very real impacts on participants and pragmatic outcomes. Whereas tangible outputs of rituals are not always evident, ritual theory suggests that participants can derive latent meaning and significant comfort from their application. Although rituals serve to reify certain norms or control behaviors, they may also reaffirm civic values and encourage group cohesion. A deeper appreciation of public meeting rituals will enable participants and officials to respond more effectively to restructured or nontraditional formats as well as better deal with the challenges of maintaining participation when rituals lose their meaning.

Each year, thousands of public meetings are held at the local, state, and federal levels as methods of public participation in policy and decision making. The outcomes of these meetings vary widely. Some research suggests that citizen input can influence decisions (Cole and Caputo 1984). Others have offered evidence that citizens can use public meetings for purposes other than influencing decisions, including building community cohesiveness, networking, and shaming public officials (Adams 2004; Checkoway 1981). Although research has identified public officials who consider public meetings “democracy in action,” it has similarly found troubled skeptics who believe meetings do more damage than good (McComas 2001). Some have suggested that public officials use public meetings primarily to fulfill participation mandates as minimally as possible, pointing to meetings that take place after key decisions are made or use procedures that discourage interaction among participants (Berry et al. 1997; Checkoway 1981; Kemmis 1990; Richardson, Sherman, and Gismondi 1993). Still other research has found that some community residents voice their concerns at public meetings even when they believe their

participation will not impact decisions (McComas 2003). A cursory review of public meetings in the popular press also reveals examples of the perceived futility of public meetings, such as this story about rent control hearings:

But if the tenants' anger was palpable, so, too, was the sense that everyone attending the all-day hearing was essentially powerless to do much to change anything. Under state law, the Division of Housing and Community Renewal must calculate proposed increases every other year, hold a public hearing and, barring any egregious mathematical errors, approve the increases. (Chen 2004, 3; emphasis added)

If some public meetings appear to have so little impact, one may wonder why citizens would bother to attend them or public officials to conduct them. Along these lines, some have compared public meetings to rituals, implying that they have little concrete value or meaning (Gibbs 2002). Heberlein (1976, 200) compared the ritualistic use of public meetings to the wedding ceremony ritual of the minister asking whether anyone knows of a reason why the wedding should not take place: “No one expects or anticipates public involvement.”¹

Although little research has focused on the rituals of public meetings,² research has examined other political rituals, including polling (Lipari 1999), voting (Bennett 1980; Lukes 1975), election conventions (Marvin 1994), and the planning process (Abramson and Inglehart 1995). Public meetings seem a natural addition to this list. Moreover, we believe that an

examination of public meeting rituals may offer insights into why the typical public meeting seems to repeat itself every day in boardrooms, city halls, convention centers, and school auditoriums across the United States. As with any ritual, it is

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possible that public meeting rituals produce latent, if not obvious, impacts on participants and outcomes. Further, while much of the discourse has pointed out negative consequences of public meeting rituals, a closer examination may suggest positive effects of public meeting rituals. In particular, ritualistic behavior may lead to values consensus and social solidarity.

The next section briefly describes public meetings before situating our discussion in ritual theory. Using a framework for examining ritual, we then provide examples that illustrate public meeting rituals. Finally, we discuss potential impacts, both positive and negative, of public meeting rituals.

Background on Public Meetings

Public meetings have various incarnations, although most can be described as an organized, social gathering of three or more people that is open to any member of the public. Although public meetings are typically associated with government agency initiatives, anyone can organize one, including religious organizations, citizens' groups, and neighborhood associations. Accordingly, public meetings serve many purposes; some meetings are held primarily to provide information, others to obtain public input into decisions or recommendations, and still others to build consensus around proposed planning initiatives.

Just as the organizers and purposes of public meetings vary, so do their formats. Some public agencies sponsor "open houses" or availability sessions, during which citizens circulate among poster-like displays and have the opportunity to speak one on one with public officials or technical experts. Other agencies use more traditional "town hall" meeting formats, which often involve an audience facing a podium or panel of speakers. Following opening remarks by the meeting's sponsors or organizers, the meeting usually proceeds with some type of presentation, followed by questions and/or comments from audience members. Some agencies combine the two formats, starting with an availability session in the afternoon followed by an informational public meeting. Meetings take place in the morning, afternoon, and evening in locations ranging from hotel ballrooms to municipal board rooms, churches, and school cafeterias.

These descriptions only begin to hint at the variance among public meeting formats and functions. Some meetings are part of a legal process, whereas others satisfy voluntary initiatives. Legally required public meetings are sometimes referred to as hearings and may follow more traditional procedures, such as public comment periods; in comparison, voluntary and nongovernmental meetings have much more room to experiment with novel methods of communication. Indeed, the past 30 years have witnessed a proliferation of public meeting designs, such as citizen juries, consensus conferences, and deliberative polls, many of which prioritize public deliberation (Dryzek 2001; Fung 2003; Gastil and Levine 2005; Hajer and Wagenaar 2003; Halverson 2006). As a whole, deliberative meeting designs encourage citizens to talk together about a public issue and engage in well-informed and reasoned decision making. The scholarship on public deliberation provides an ideal toward which groups can strive (see Cohen 1996; Gastil and Black 2008), and

these innovative meeting designs appear to help groups work toward that ideal (Gastil and Levine 2005; Webler and Tuler 2000). Even so, these deliberative designs are still relatively new and not the most common way to hold public meetings. Whether ritual may slow the adoption of these new designs merits consideration.

Our discussion of public meeting rituals is arguably most relevant to traditional public meetings, voluntary or mandated, sponsored by U.S. public agencies. This narrowed scope still encompasses an array of meetings taking place at various levels of government for a variety of topics related to public administration. Despite their differences, these meetings often share similar rituals thanks to their common administrative heritage (Rosenbaum 1978). It may be that similar public meeting rituals repeat themselves in nongovernmental settings, where citizens who partake in government-sponsored meetings reproduce what is familiar to them.

Ritual Theory

There are various definitions of what constitutes a ritual, although commonalities are present.³ One that captures many of these shared aspects is Lukes's definition of ritual as a "rule-governed activity of a symbolic character which draws the attention of its participants to objects of thought and feeling which they hold to be of special significance" (1975, 291). Public meetings, in this sense, can be considered rule-governed activities that draw the attention of participants to values associated with the allocation of resources at the local, state, and national levels.

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Durkheim (1912) provided the best known theory of ritual in his argument about the central function of religion in social life. For Durkheim and others, the sacred–profane dichotomy represented the basis for collective morality and thus society (Kertzer 1988). Durkheim believed that progress could be understood as individuals in society taking on increasingly diverse roles. He argued that individuals in early societies played largely the same roles and so were more likely to share a common moral view (beliefs and values), a situation he termed "mechanical solidarity." Conversely, he argued that increasing differentiation in social roles in his own time was leading to an organic set of interdependent relationships that provided some stability, but not enough to overcome the loss of moral consensus he associated with undifferentiated societies. According to Durkheim, sharing in regular ritual with its attendant group dynamics could help limit or reverse this social disintegration. This perspective suggests that a shared moral understanding of the world serves to hold societies together; therefore, ritual can act as a conservative force to bind communities through moral consensus. In a similar vein, scholars have argued that rituals pay homage to sacred objects, which are tied to core cultural values (Packanowsky and O'Donnell-Trujillo 1983; Philipsen 1997). By performing a ritual, participants orient toward, and reaffirm, the cultural value. Thus, studying rituals is one way for scholars to apprehend the key values of a cultural group.

Others have highlighted how ritual fits within a broader societal structure. Bell (1997) suggested a "symbolic-culturalist" approach,

in which ritual can be understood as the manipulation of symbols (e.g., words and action) to form texts. Rather than arguing that all rituals share similar symbolic structures, Bell prioritized not what ritual does but “what ritual means” (1997, 60). In turn, she argued that the effects of rituals emerge from the reception of symbolic messages. Rituals can thus be used to frame the world in a particular way (Bateson 1972). Goffman (1967) exemplified this approach in his descriptions of the everyday rituals that individuals use to project the image of themselves that they want others to accept.

Bell used the term “ritualization” to describe the process through which an actor uses a range of techniques to “to deploy schemes that can manipulate the social order on some level and appropriate its categories for a semicoherent vision of personal identity and action” (1992, 216). Bell argued that rituals can be read as texts but emphasized that the “practice” of rituals gives them their power. Further, as with Goffman (1967), she argued that it makes sense to look at many different activities as including varying degrees of ritualistic behavior. Thus, rather than a single, archetypical form of ritual, there are varying degrees of ritualism and, at the individual level, ritualization.

Rituals of Public Meetings

Having provided some background on ritual theory, it makes sense to offer more concrete examples of public meeting rituals. In her second book on ritual, Bell (1997) provided a useful index of the types of features that might be included in any effort at ritualization: some mixture of formalism, traditionalism, invariance, rule governance, sacral symbolism, and performance. Others have suggested similar sets of features (Knuf 1993; Moore and Myerhoff 1977; Riley 1993). Here, we apply Bell’s typology to a selection of public meeting rituals. Rather than presenting evidence from a particular public meeting, we draw examples from previous research and other publicly available documents. Far from an exhaustive inventory, these examples are meant to both illustrate and perhaps stimulate further discussion of public meeting rituals.

Formalism. Formalism sets an activity apart from common practice, such as using more elaborate gestures during formal greetings (Bell 1997). Public meetings, particularly mandated ones, tend to follow formalized procedures, such as Robert’s Rules of Order or other turn-taking models. Participants are often referred to by their title or their specific role in the meeting, and meetings follow a predetermined program of events. Experts or hired consultants often wear formal business attire, meant to convey professionalism but also to set them apart from citizens. All of these features foreground that the public meeting is an event separate from participants’ everyday interactions requiring a level of decorum. As to possible effects, Kaminstein noted how an “etiquette of politeness” (1996, 462) that prevailed at a series of public meetings may have made it more difficult for citizens to voice their concerns.

Traditionalism. Traditionalism refers to the tendency of ritual actors to draw on real or imagined past practices and customs during the activity (Bell 1997). Remarks such as “we have always done it this way” evoke a sense of traditionalism, as do traditional formats of some public meetings that seem to prioritize expert opinion over citizen input. In many ways, such traditionalism may represent an artifact of early approaches to citizen participation, which granted

an opportunity for public comment but did not actively pursue it (Rosenbaum 1978). The traditional public meeting held near the end of the decision-making process epitomizes this approach, hearing back to the “decide announce defend” approach to public participation. Kertzer described this function of public meetings in his observation of the “darker side” of public meeting rituals:

One of the most common means of legitimating a political decision . . . is to hold formal meetings at which these decisions are discussed. Since all participants theoretically have the right to say what they want, such meetings give people the impression that the decisions that are taken result from a process in which they, or at least some others much like themselves, are involved. Yet we know that in most cases the subsequent political course has little or nothing to do with the content of the meeting. Moreover, strong symbolic forces are at work at such meetings to limit severely the kinds of criticisms and alternative ideas that can be expressed. (1988, 42)

Others have similarly warned of the use of public meetings to legitimize decisions that have already been made or to co-opt participants into tacit approval by their very act of attending a public meeting (Berry et al. 1997; Checkoway 1981; Heberlein 1976b).

Invariance. Bell (1997) suggested that ritualized activities are invariant to the degree that they are timeless in nature and repeated in exact manners. Swearing an oath to “tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth” before taking the witness stand in the U.S. court system is one example (Bell 1997). Public meetings also often follow invariant procedures. Typical seating arrangements include a panel of experts or officials who sit facing the audience. Experts take the floor first, armed with PowerPoint presentations, while citizens wait, sometimes an hour or longer, to have their chance to speak. Citizens may also come prepared to use a common repertoire of techniques and symbols. For example, citizens often come to the microphone with prescribed, lengthy questions that function as what one Seattle town hall organizer called “speeches in disguise” (Black and Leichter 2003). Other patterns of citizen behavior include wearing buttons or carrying signs that advocate a position on the issue.

Rule governance. Ritualized activities are governed by regulations that constrain and control what counts as appropriate behavior (Bell 1997). At the federal, state, and local levels, laws regulate the occurrence and the structure of some public meetings. These include notifying the public about the meeting in the legal announcement section of the newspaper or the U.S. *Federal Register*. In addition to regulating the timing of meetings, laws often mandate the type of exchanges and information that must be presented at public meetings. To comment for the record, citizens must typically write down their questions on index cards and wait for officials to invite them to speak. They must then proceed to a microphone, where they state their name prior to their comment. Often, they face a time limit (e.g., three minutes per comment). Sometimes public officials are allowed to respond, while other times they are not.

Sacral symbolism. Activities that bring to mind the sacred nature of things have ritual-like characteristics in that they “evoke experiences of a greater, higher, or more universalized reality” (Bell 1997, 159).

The rights of citizenship, assembly, and free speech are powerful American symbols associated with public meetings. The symbolism associated with participation in a public meeting can likely trace its roots to images of early American democracy and the town meeting (Zimmerman 1999). Ironically, rather than promoting free speech and democratic decision making, some have argued that today's public meetings emerged out of a desire to minimize citizen impact on established political institutions and government by public officials who felt threatened by rising claims for participation (Checkoway 1981).

Performance. The performance aspect of ritualized activities showcases how ritual can create “a sense of condensed totality” that shapes “people’s experience and cognitive ordering of the world” (Bell 1997, 161). Relating to meetings in general, Goffman (1963) wrote of the role of dramaturgical displays, saying that language, emotional tones, and settings can be analyzed much like one might analyze a play. For public meetings, the “cast of characters” often includes the stoic agency official, the detached technical or scientific expert, the grandstanding politician, and the emotional supplicant. Citizens in the audience fill the role more akin to the traditional Greek chorus, cheering and booing as needed. Again, a cursory review of public meetings in the news provides other examples that illustrate this point. After a public meeting in Boston over a controversial hotel, one journalist observed,

Some residents passionately lobbied for what could be the second hotel in Brookline, while others opposed the plan vehemently by hissing, hooting, booing, and snarling. Anti-hotel advocates sported stickers that read “Danger. Urban Sprawl Ahead. No Hotel!” and one senior held up a sign, “Webster Street is no place for a hotel. No, no, no, no hotel!” (Abrahms 1999, 1)

Another example comes from a story covering a battle over public land:

Inside the smaller room, the temperature was as high as the emotions, which often boiled over into applause or catcalls. Despite the heated rhetoric, no minds appeared to be changed on either side.

Audubon renovation backers wore stickers reading “Yes! Better, Safer Park.” Opponents handed out stickers proclaiming “It’s Not Too Late.” (Egler 2001, 1)

A final example comes from a Boston newspaper: “There was shouting and jeering and booing—the kind of crowd response more at home at a professional sporting event than a Planning Board hearing” (Costa 2002, 1).

The Strategic Use of Rituals

Descriptions of public meeting rituals primarily focus on the latent, symbolic meaning of rituals. As such, our focus is not necessarily on whether a ritual led to changes in policy direction, except insofar as such a change (or lack thereof) might communicate underly-

ing messages about the relationships between individuals, groups, and their governing agencies. These messages are among the many potential impacts of public meeting rituals.

Kertzer (1988) concluded from his analysis that political rituals are intimately connected to power relationships within society (see also Bell 1988; Lukes 1975). He further argued that rituals themselves use latent power based on the potency of the symbols and the context of their use, suggesting that successful ritual “presents a picture of the world that is so emotionally compelling that it is beyond debate” (Kertzer 1988, 101). This latent power is connected to the historical aspect of many rituals, including the socialization and education of individuals by their societies. Consistent with Durkheim’s notion of collective effervescence, ritual practice can combine the power of group psychology with potent symbols of society to promote solidarity without requiring complete consensus, only acquiescence.

Rituals will best tie groups together, Kertzer (1988) wrote, when they use sacred symbols in an ambiguous way and thus provide slightly different meanings to different audiences. Rituals, from this perspective, work largely at the heuristic and emotional level, using repetition to reaffirm previous socialization. Directly addressing political rituals and myth, Bennett (1980) also appeared to equate rituals with an effort to frame reality and thereby impart specific schema for understanding the world. He argued that political rituals reflect underlying myths about political beliefs and that such rituals aim to recreate those myths through the strategic manipulation of symbols.

If we view the use of rituals as an intentional manipulation of symbols to frame issues in a specific manner, we can envision group solidarity as an outcome resulting from a shared sense of norms and values toward a sacred object (termed “value consensus”). Inasmuch as individuals require such shared understandings to collaborate, such consensus could be considered social solidarity.

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target object in a specific way. For example, arguing that a landfill should shut down because the adjacent community does not want it prioritizes community self-determination while downplaying values associated with business rights or scientific decision making.

With regard to the importance of context in giving rituals power, most of the rituals that Kertzer (1988) described deal with large-scale political events, such as coronations, elections, and protests. Such rituals may occur at important, standardized times on the calendar, but their very structure may be designed to set apart the event from everyday life. Even in the more mundane world

of politics manifest in public meetings, some the underlying sacred objects—the political values of the society—should remain constant.

Marshalling Counter-Rites

Official actors are not the only ones who can marshal symbols and contexts in political conflict (Kertzer 1988; Lukes 1975). Political dissent, for example, is often scheduled to take place during symbolically charged events rather than substantively important times. Protest organizers may see more value in organizing a protest during a public meeting than during a regular day on the legislative calendar. Political dissenters often attempt to draw on symbols that are consistent with sacred political values. For example, a citizens group in Wisconsin posted this invitation to join a political rally held prior to a government-sponsored public hearing on the Fox River PCB cleanup:

Rally for the River! Please come one hour early to the December 5th Public Hearing and join with hundreds of other local citizens in protest of this awful capping proposal. If you can, bring personalized signs expressing your concerns. (We'll have extra signs if you run out of time.) Bring Friends! (http://www.foxriverwatch.com/2006_ROD_Amendment.html)

Organizing a large crowd, for example, could be said to demonstrate popular support and thus refer to the important value of majority rule. Evoking the symbol of the river, which has suffered historical pollution, also helps galvanize support around this voiceless victim.

Kertzer (1988) called such rites of opposition “counter rites” and argued that acts such as the symbolic burning of draft cards and peaceful resistance represent efforts to evoke potent symbols from history (i.e., traditionalism). According to Kertzer (1988), governments demonstrate their awareness that dissenting voices can borrow power from ritual when they attempt to isolate protestors from view during official state-to-state summits. Whereas Edelman (1967, 2001) and others (Tuchman 1972) maintained that the craven use of political symbols (aided by the media) can lead to social stagnation, Kertzer (1988) argued that it is important to recognize that ritual is not inherently a conservative force in society.

The ability of nonofficial actors to use ritual does not mean that rituals cannot contribute to enhancing or maintaining values consensus (group solidarity). Goody (1977) argued that the group gaining solidarity may not include all members of society. It is entirely likely, he contended, that some group activities that might fall under the descriptor of ritual have the effect of creating in-group solidarity (i.e., value consensus) at the expense of societal solidarity. This seems inherently true, as Kertzer’s (1988) review of the rites of fascist Germany attests. Nevertheless, the “practice” approach to ritual emphasizes that rituals can be best understood as both able to manage conflict as well as to integrate members of a social group, even if it is not always successful (Hermanowicz and Morgan 1999). There is nothing within this perspective that says there must only be one group, though it does suggest that those who seek to deploy rituals will gain the most adherents when they attempt to use symbols that resonate with the widest possible audience. The ritualistic act of national polling, for example, can be seen as a mechanism through which all of the state is seen to be speaking to itself (even

though this dialogue may be distorted or cursory) (Lipari 1999). Another example is the ritualistic act of asking for public comment when little or no input is expected or even desired (Heberlein 1976). Further, the very desirability of including cues to past events and patterns of behavior makes it more likely that ritual may serve to control behavior near the bounds of general acceptability.

Outcomes of Public Meeting Rituals

Perhaps when public meetings succeed, participants and public officials can indeed be seen as participating in the same ritual activity. Quite apart from whatever substantive information gets exchanged, such a meeting could be characterized as one in which the rituals are accepted by those present and everyone leaves feeling pleased with the process. Such an outcome is consistent with theories of procedural justice, which emphasize how the perceived fairness of procedures can contribute to satisfaction and acceptance of outcomes (Lind and Tyler 1988; Tyler 1994; Tyler and Lind 1992). Just as ritual theories emphasize the potential for ritualization to build group cohesion, the core of procedural justice is that procedures speak to individuals’ perceptions that their group is being respected. Although procedural justice does not directly speak to the potential of increasing group solidarity, some research has found that perceiving fair treatment at public meetings positively relates to feelings of community connectedness (McComas, Trumbo, and Besley 2007).

During times of uncertainty, the traditions and familiarity of public meeting rituals may also provide citizens with a type of peace or comfort. Knuf (1993) found, for instance, that participation in rituals can help promote cohesiveness and manage stress in organizations. Checkoway similarly suggested that public meetings could provide “a symbolic setting in which to give people a sense of collective identity, display leadership, identify allies to a position, rally the troops, and recruit new members” (1981, 577). Political research has pointed out the symbolic affirmation that individuals may derive from participating in elections (Lukes 1975). In turn, efforts to break out of traditional meeting formats into more innovative and interactive deliberative formats presumably take participants out of their “comfort zone” and may leave them feeling ungrounded or dissatisfied. These feelings may account for some resistance to change or adopt new designs on behalf of the participants and public officials.

It could be argued that some of the most successful and large-scale efforts at incorporating deliberation into public meetings have drawn on some archetypes and ritual objects of public meetings and attempted to revise them, rather than coming up with completely new participatory designs. For example, *AmericaSpeaks* (see Lukensmeyer, Goldman, and Brigham 2005) draws on the New England town meeting archetype, and deliberative opinion polls (see Fishkin 1991) use the familiar symbol of the public opinion poll to anchor or legitimize their approach to citizen participation in public meetings. Both of these deliberative designs use formal aspects of public meetings, such as presentations by experts and a chance for participants to ask questions. They augment these standard public meeting elements, however, with interactions that foreground deliberation, such as small group discussion. In this way, the organizers of these forums seem to recognize the value of public meeting rituals and use these ritual elements in ways that maintain the sense of

meaning and familiarity; however, they envision the meeting to better incorporate deliberative ideals.

On the other hand, the perpetuation of some public meeting rituals may also result in negative consequences. Scholars of ritual would argue that participation in rituals can legitimize the dominant political arrangements in society, whether consciously or unconsciously (Kertzer 1988). In this respect, public meeting rituals may legitimate existing power dynamics between citizens and public officials or privilege certain forms of discourse (Richardson, Sherman, and Gismondi 1993). Such outcomes could result from a meeting itself or over time, as citizens come to believe that officials are ignoring their concerns.

It is also important to point out that individual tolerance of ritual will vary. Just as some people may become dissatisfied with the rituals of organized religion, so, too, may rituals turn some people away from public meetings. This may hold particularly true if the rituals hold little meaning for participants or produce little value for officials. Research on decision making in organizations has shown that people who are given the opportunity to participate in a decision are more likely to view the decision as just than those not allowed to participate; however, those who are given only limited opportunity to participate can sometimes view the decision as less fair than those given no opportunity to participate, described as a “frustration effect” (Folger et al. 1979). With regard to public meetings, people may lose faith in the process and cease to participate if they believe their participation is limited through the strategic manipulation of rituals.

Certain types of ritualistic behavior, such as the performances noted earlier, may also provoke criticism and have consequences for civic engagement. In the words of one official after an emotional public meeting, “I can understand people’s frustrations and anger, but the only thing that will get us through the process is the ability for everybody to respectfully listen and then respond to any speaker, whether it be a neighbor, a Planning Board member, or an applicant” (Costa 2002, 1). Other research has found that some people avoid public meetings because of the perceived poor behavior of other citizens (McComas, Besley, and Trumbo 2006); on the contrary, this research also found other citizens who attended public meetings for the performance aspect, in their words, to see “how bad” it could get.

The extent to which public meeting rituals have induced stereotypes may bear further consideration, particularly with regard to their influence on communication and participation. The fact that one can speak of a stereotypical “bad public meeting” suggests that previous socialization has provided dissatisfied citizens with a set of symbols they can use to express dissatisfaction during a public process. Future research could aim to provide a catalog of such behaviors; nevertheless, it is easy to imagine angry participants deploying rituals in a way that suggests that officials are outsiders, that officials care more about abstract numbers than real people, or that the backroom deals have already resulted in a decision. Further, such efforts might be made by an individual or a group of citizens, bound together by their dissatisfaction.

Bell’s (1997) elements of ritualization can again provide insight as to the types of behaviors relevant to citizens’ efforts to symbolically

assert their values. For example, in some cases, individuals may form citizens’ groups or some other organization with formalized structures (regularized meetings, officers). Alexis de Tocqueville (1835), of course, drew attention to such voluntary organizations as the very essence of American liberalism, and contemporary authors have continued to echo this theme (Putnam 2000; Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1995). Invariance and rule regulation may be demonstrated in the hypothesized use of a standard repertoire of arguments and public interventions. The formation of such groups might thus constitute symbols that are themselves meant to demonstrate subgroups beliefs. In this regard, the sacred values being defended by citizens could be interpreted as their lay understanding of their rights of citizenship. A sense of such rights would be bolstered by the belief that they are representing the views of their fellow, non-involved neighbors. Such beliefs might then manifest themselves in the performance of various forms of official opposition, including but not limited to opposition during a public meeting. Altogether, it might be hypothesized that the ritualistic behavior citizens exhibit, both at public meetings and during other actions surrounding the issue of concern, could lead to enhanced group solidarity.

When multiple potential subgroups accept the same interpretation of the issue, it may enhance overall social solidarity. In contrast, poor participation processes may lead to situations in which solidarity building occurs in groups that do not represent the overall set of potential stakeholders. This does not, however, mean that all is lost. It may be, for example, that the formation of a citizens’ group enables closer contact between a set of community elites and public officials that can collectively work toward a common understanding of a contentious issue. In this way, Kertzer’s (1988) argument that ritualistic behavior can structure and manage conflict would be borne out.

The foregoing can also be put in the form of specific hypotheses. Namely, when citizens and meeting organizers agree on how to understand an issue, overall social solidarity is enhanced. In turn, when meeting organizers and citizens disagree, subgroup solidarity will develop. Finally, overall social solidarity may still develop over time if subgroup solidarity leads to more formalized, structured engagement. These hypotheses could be further refined through fieldwork that examines specific public meetings. Studies combining public meeting observation with analysis of meeting transcripts and/or interviews with meeting participants and organizers would offer a rich set of data on which to draw further conclusions. The availability of archival data for some government-sponsored public meetings may offer another avenue for exploring the prevalence and impact of public meeting rituals.

Conclusion

At the level of imagery, it is easy to conceive of much of what passes for public participation in public meetings as ritualistic. In a traditional public meeting format, an audience sits before a panel of experts, and these experts make one or more presentations, much like a congregation sits before the clergy to listen to a sermon with various readings. Public meetings, however, may be seen as different in that they are generally focused around a specific project or piece of legislation such that they have an immediate substantive facet, whether it is to gather citizens’ viewpoints or announce new initiatives. Given the emphasis put on ritualization above, this focus on

substantive outcomes should not rule out the value of looking at the ritual aspects of public participation in general and public meetings specifically. Durkheim underscored this potential for public life as ritual in his oft-quoted statement:

No society can exist that does not feel the need at regular intervals to sustain and reaffirm the collective feelings and ideas that constitute its unity and its personality. Now, this moral remaking can be achieved only by means of meetings, assemblies, or congregation in which individuals brought into close contact, reaffirm in common their common feelings: hence those ceremonies whose goals, results, and methods do not differ in kind from religious ceremonies. (1915, 321)

Bell's (1997) typology of ritual provided a framework for examining what may be considered as well-known public meeting rituals. This understanding of public meeting rituals, in turn, suggests the possibility of looking at a social solidarity as a potential outcome of public participation. Earlier, we operationalized social solidarity as values consensus vis-à-vis an object or issue of attention. Many values underlie a public participation process. Among those this article has discussed are scientific rationalism, individual rights, and representation of views. These certainly do not represent the breadth of possible sacred values that might underlie positions during public participation processes. Rather, understanding what specific values are at play during public participation may represent an area for future investigation.

The relationship between public participation and social solidarity

lies in the nature of the participation process. In general, the opportunity for group discussion and interaction opens up the possibility for collective understanding of the issue of concern. This collective understanding of the underlying values and interpretations of the key issues is an important component of deliberative public meetings (Gastil and Black 2008). Such consensus is not, however, automatic. As was suggested in the discussion of public meetings, poorly executed processes may foster subgroup identity development at the expense of the larger group; moreover, engagement processes that take the individual out of the group and seek to address him or her at the individual level may result in less opportunity for group consensus. Similarly, using participation to isolate a small group to seek a set of opinions based on thoughtful deliberation might necessarily result in sacrificing the potential for larger group effects.

For the practitioner, the thoughtful use of deliberative techniques in public meetings may help avoid these negative outcomes. Some examples include incorporating small group breakout sessions, which can enable more people to speak than large-scale discussions. So, too, can restructuring the format of public meetings (e.g., seating arrangements) place participants and meeting organizers on equal levels. To dispel suspicions that they are being used to "divide and conquer" public resistance, availability sessions may work best when they are coupled with large group discussions. In concert with meetings, practitioners can distribute neutral questionnaires to

gather a greater representation of views from affected stakeholders, which are then shared with the larger group. While providing more input into decisions, surveys can also sometimes uncover and dispel widely held misconceptions. Other innovative formats, such as search conferences, are designed specifically to encourage practitioners and participants to focus on common values over individual or subgroup interests. In turn, practitioners should recognize their own use of rituals in the design and execution of public meetings and consider how such rituals might reaffirm certain power relationships in society, such as scientific rationalism over lay expertise.

The argument presented here suggests the importance of values consensus as a dependent variable representing social solidarity. The general hypothesis is that a participation process can be considered successful when it leads to an agreement on what values are relevant to an object or decision under consideration. For example, in discussing a nuclear power plant siting, one side might argue that the issue is one of technical safety (emphasis on scientific rationalism), whereas the other side might argue that a community's expressed concern over uncertainty about long-term health impacts, the morality of nuclear power, or property values should take precedence (emphasis on citizen choice). Theories of ritual emphasize the importance of how various actors may frame their behavior to increase the likelihood that their interpretation—their sacred value—is the one that gets accepted by decision makers.

Emphasizing values consensus as an outcome variable is a different approach than other common ways of looking at public participation. The discussion of traditional public meetings, for example,

noted that procedural justice (Tyler and Lind 1992) calls for looking at outcomes, such as satisfaction with authorities or future participatory behavior. Whereas a researcher analyzing a public participation process using a procedural justice approach might look exclusively for fairness cues, one using a theory of ritual might take a broader approach that seeks to understand what values the participants themselves seem to emphasize. This does not imply that the procedural justice approach is somehow of more limited value. A researcher following a targeted approach might be better able to make causal predictions with a higher degree of confidence,

whereas it may not be clear to a student of ritual what impact ritualistic attempts to frame a debate will make. In any case, it seems clear that theories of ritual and ritualization may offer an additional avenue toward understanding the group dynamics taking place during public meetings.

Notes

1. Some have questioned whether having an impact matters to participants. Much of the research that seeks to understand why people participate in political activities has focused on the concept of political efficacy, or the degree to which individuals believe they can influence policy (Finkel 1985; Pateman 1970). Likewise, scholars of political engagement have been perplexed by what has been termed the "paradox of participation" (Leighley 1991; Whitley 1995). This occurs when individuals participate in political activities even when their probability of influencing the outcomes is minor to nonexistent. The New York City public meeting example

The relationship between public participation and social solidarity lies in the nature of the participation process. In general, the opportunity for group discussion and interaction opens up the possibility for collective understanding of the issue of concern.

used in the text illustrates the paradox of participation since it does not seem “rational” that someone would participate in a meeting when they were essentially powerless to affect the outcomes. From a rational actor perspective, the costs of attending a public meeting should outweigh the nonexistent benefits (Whitley 1995).

2. Goodsell (1989) included public meetings as part of an attempt to argue that public administration can be viewed as ritual; Kertzer (1988) mentioned public meetings only in passing; and Rosenbaum (1978) referred to public involvement as ritual.
3. Despite significant attention to ritual, there is no widespread agreement on how to define a ritual, what constitutes a ritual, or how rituals should best be studied. Goody (1977) argued that the term “ritual” is too vague to provide empirical tractability. Knuf (1993) similarly argued that organizational researchers too often use ritual in a general, everyday sense without adequately defining the term. Among scholars who have ventured definitions, most tend to agree that rituals are “socially standardized and repetitive” (Kertzer 1988) and imbued with symbolism (Lukes 1975). For a debate on this topic in the field of organizational communication, see Knuf (1993), Philipsen (1993), and Riley (1993).

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