

**Communicating about Social Justice in Participatory Budgeting in the United States:
'Coming Together' to Benefit Communities**

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Abstract

Participatory budgeting (PB) is a public deliberation process designed to advance social justice by engaging geographical community members, especially those from oppressed populations, in collective decision making about spending public funds to improve their community. Although scholars have studied many aspects of PB, including, from a social justice perspective, the participation of oppressed population members in, and the equitableness of outcomes that result from, the process, little research has examined participants' communication during PB deliberation, in general, and, specifically, with regard to making the process socially just. To fill that gap, this 2.5-year, applied, ethnographic, community-based study of two PB processes implemented in Denver, CO, examined participants' social justice discourse during their deliberations. The findings revealed three themes: participants' listening to marginalized voices, people from oppressed populations engaging in the PB process, and community members 'coming together' to benefit oppressed populations. The findings illustrate discursive themes that advance social justice during PB deliberations, and, from an applied perspective, suggest that to recruit and retain participants from oppressed populations, as well as to engage in deliberation that promotes equitable outcomes, PB organizers and facilitators in the United States should promote participants' communication about those themes during their deliberations.

Keywords: communication activism research, social justice, community-based research, public deliberation, civic engagement

**Communicating about Social Justice in Participatory Budgeting in the United States:
‘Coming Together’ to Benefit Communities**

Participatory budgeting (PB) is a public deliberation process that involves residents controlling the allocation of a portion of a public budget in their geographic locale (e.g., neighborhood, school, or city; Marquetti et al., 2012). This form of participatory democracy typically lasts 8–9 months and begins with a steering committee of 15–45 residents establishing rules for the process (e.g., how to conduct outreach for participant recruitment and who can participate in PB; Hagelskamp, Rinehart et al., 2016). All eligible residents then are invited to propose projects to improve their community, which another group of volunteer residents (called ‘budget delegates’), using the steering committee’s eligibility criteria, vet and develop into feasible project proposals that contain project designs, cost estimates, stakeholder assessments, and timelines for completion. The steering committee then decides which project proposals to place on a ballot, and residents of the geographic locale vote for project proposals they want funded, with those proposals receiving the most votes funded, within the constraints of the PB budget. Finally, local government implements the approved projects, and the PB process is repeated the next year.

From its inception in Brazil in 1989 by the leftist Workers’ Party, PB was intended, especially, to encourage people who, historically, have been marginalized, oppressed, and/or excluded from civic discourse (hereafter, ‘oppressed populations’) to participate in redirecting public funds to meet their community needs (de Souza Santos, 1998). By engaging oppressed populations and benefitting their communities, PB, thus, seeks to advance *social justice*, such that ‘people have their human rights and freedoms respected, receive equitable treatment with

regard to opportunities and resources, and are not discriminated against because of their class, gender, race, sexual orientation, and similar identity markers' (Frey & Blinne, 2017, p. 12).

PB has been implemented in more than 3,000 locations worldwide, with research conducted about many aspects of the process, including, as explained later, from a social justice perspective (e.g., with regard to who participates and outcomes that result from the process). However, PB still is nascent in the United States, with, as of 2019, only approximately 20 citywide processes having been conducted (Participatory Budgeting Project, n.d.), and questions have been raised about whether and the extent to which PB can promote social justice in the United States (Leighninger & Rinehart, 2016). Moreover, regardless of where PB has been studied, with some exceptions (e.g., Jovanovic & Russell, 2019; Russell & Gardner, 2021; Russell & Jovanovic, 2020), researchers have not focused on participants' communication during PB deliberations, in general, and, specifically, their discourse about social justice aspects of the process.

This study sought to fill those gaps by investigating the social justice discourse that characterized the group deliberations of two U.S. PB processes implemented from August to December 2018 by a coalition of nonprofit organizations in two areas of Denver, CO (the first use of PB in the state): 'Cole Has a Soul' was implemented in the Cole neighborhood and 'Auraria PB' was conducted on the Auraria Campus. Each process allocated \$30,000 using one-time grant money, independent of any public institution (e.g., city government). As explained later in more detail, both Cole neighborhood residents and Auraria Campus students are comprised disproportionately of people from oppressed populations. Because the processes were implemented by community organizations independent of governing institutions, they afford unique insights into what it takes to recruit and promote the participation of people from

oppressed communities. After all, ‘Planners and officials, not community members, typically design and implement public participation efforts . . . and often do not seek out marginalized groups’ (Townsend, 2021, p. 5). Through my study of these two PB processes, I found that participants’ discourses of listening to marginalized voices, promoting engagement in the process, and ‘coming together’ advanced social justice during PB deliberations, and, from an applied perspective, suggest that to recruit and retain participants from oppressed populations, as well as to engage in deliberation that promotes equitable outcomes, PB organizers and facilitators in the United States should promote participants’ communication about those themes during their deliberations.

Lastly, just as emergent scholarly conversations related to #CommunicationSoWhite have sought to challenge knowledge claims within predominantly White academic institutions (Chakravartty et al., 2018), the activists I describe in this article sought to challenge communication norms of civic engagement in predominantly White governing institutions. The study, thus, contributes to the discussion sparked by #CommunicationSoWhite by centering the perspectives of people from oppressed populations and their challenges to hegemonic discourses about civic engagement.

Literature Review

This article explicates the 2.5-year, applied, ethnographic, community-based study that I conducted about the social justice discourse that characterized these two PB processes’ group deliberations. I begin by reviewing scholarly literature related to public participation by people from oppressed populations, PB processes conducted in North America, and PB deliberators’ communication.

Struggles for Justice by People from Oppressed Populations

As PB has been implemented around the globe, it has been used, sometimes, in service of a neoliberal development agenda. Both the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank (two of the most powerful global institutions that have advanced neoliberalism) have endorsed PB as a best practice for participatory democracy (Goldfrank, 2012), but activist groups, such as the Movement for Black Lives, also have endorsed PB (Phelps, 2016), suggesting that, depending on its implementation, the process can be a tool of oppression and/or liberation.

This study explores public participation as emergent in the political struggles of subaltern communities through locally specific communication practices and values that emerge through engagement in everyday politics (Chatterjee, 2004), as well as recognizing that local participation in civic affairs can be a site for intervening in oppressive structures of the state (Dutta, 2015). Often, people from oppressed populations participate outside mainstream mechanisms/institutions of political representation to question and resist exploitative social structures (Dutta, 2015). The organizers of the PB processes examined in this article sought to engage in public participation ‘grounded in local cultural understandings of human life and well-being, [and] situated in resistance to the dominant [hegemonies]’ (Dutta, 2015, p. 132).

This study builds on a scholarly tradition that has documented longstanding activism by people from oppressed populations as providing important insight into issues of justice, as well as documenting counterhegemonies that prefigure a just world (e.g., Freire, 1970; Robinson, 2020). By studying the social justice communication of these two PB processes, this article builds and expands on communication studies of public participation and activism by people from oppressed populations, with the goal of understanding communication practices and values that promote social justice (e.g., Anguiano et al., 2012; Dutta, 2011; Harter et al., 2007; Townsend, 2021; Villanueva et al., 2017).

Within that body of research, decolonial scholars of communication for social change have found values of listening and dialogic conversation as entry points of resistance to oppression for subaltern communities (Dutta, 2011). Similarly, storytelling can be a powerful communication practice among people from oppressed populations when engaging in political activism (Polletta, 2006). Despite much scholarly attention devoted to PB, as I explain next, less attention has been paid to the communication practices and values that occur during PB, especially those of people from oppressed communities that advance social justice—an area of focus that holds potential for understanding and facilitating PB’s implementation as a tool for liberation.

Participatory Budgeting

In Porto Alegre, Brazil, where PB began in 1989, the process has achieved impressive social justice results. Before implementing PB, approximately one third of Porto Alegre’s 1,000,000 residents lived in favelas on the city’s outskirts and lacked access to basic infrastructure (e.g., clean water, sanitation, medical facilities, and schools). However, after 9 years of employing PB, 98% of that city’s households possessed sewer and water connections, and the city increased the amount that it spent on public housing, schools, and health services (Bhatnagar et al., 2003).

A large number of people participated in the PB processes conducted in Porto Alegre (e.g., more than 14,000 in 2000), with many being members of oppressed populations (Baiocchi, 2001). Specifically, residents with low income and less education have participated at rates equal to and, sometimes, higher than residents who are richer and more educated (Pateman, 2012). Additionally, Indigenous Brazilians and Afro-Brazilians have been overrepresented among Porto Alegre PB participants (The World Bank, 2008).

Studies of PB in North America also have found encouraging results regarding the inclusion of participants from oppressed populations. A meta-analysis of findings from PB processes that were implemented between July 2014 and June 2015 in North America found that the minimum eligible age for voting for proposed projects was lower than 18 years old (14 or 16 being most common), with noncitizens also permitted to vote (Hagelskamp, Rinehart et al., 2016). In comparing demographics of jurisdictions where those PB processes were implemented, overall, young people (under 18), older adults (over 65), African Americans, women, and people from low-income households (less than \$50,000 annually), but not Latinx residents and those with less formal education, participated in PB proportionally to local census figures (Hagelskamp, Rinehart et al., 2016).

Despite these findings about the inclusion of people from oppressed populations, scholars have raised the concern that, for several reasons, PB processes conducted in the United States may not advance social justice (Leighninger & Rinehart, 2016). These reasons include those processes focusing on physical infrastructure instead of community-benefit programs, implementing district-based instead of citywide PB processes, lacking an explicit commitment to ensuring equity in the process, and not implementing PB as part of broader systemic reforms that promote participatory democracy (Leighninger & Rinehart, 2016).

In response to these critiques of U.S. PB processes, Pape and Lerner (2016) proposed an equity-driven model of PB, with one important feature being targeted outreach to encourage participation by people from oppressed populations. However, the model did not identify, but Pape and Lerner encouraged the exploration of, PB participants' communication during deliberations that promote the inclusion of people from oppressed populations and outcomes that benefit those populations, both of which are essential for PB processes to advance social justice.

Participatory Budgeting and Social Justice Communication

Public deliberation processes, such as PB, can afford unique opportunities and benefits for people of color, the poor, and women (Fung, 2004). Nevertheless, in the field of public deliberation, similar to the Communication discipline (Chakravartty et al., 2018), explicit explorations of the deliberation practices and values of people from oppressed populations, as well as the social justice characteristics of that deliberation, remain on the margins (Abdullah et al., 2016).

Some recent research has explored the communication of participants from oppressed populations during PB deliberations in the United States, as well as their perceptions of the process. One study found that PB participants employed ‘stories as dialogic practice in deliberations to express local knowledge and influence collective action’ (Jovanovic & Russell, 2019, p. 33), with facilitators structuring those PB meetings to encourage participants to tell stories, which often centered on matters of social justice.

A recent study also found that Latino immigrants who participated in PB engaged in collaborating, strategizing, and historicizing, that developed their civic capacities for engaging in collective decision making (Meléndez & Martinez-Cosio, 2021). In Boston, MA, where the PB process allows only residents who are 12–22-years-old to participate, participants perceived the process to be empowering for them because PB provided communicative opportunities to allocate resources, to influence positive community change, and to see themselves as being in charge of the process (Augsberger et al., 2019). Those interviewees also reported increased competence to engage in civic affairs, motivation to promote social justice, and ability to use communication skills learned from participating in PB to engage their peers in future PB processes (Augsberger et al., 2019).

A study of discourse between residents who participated in PB and local government officials found that tensions emerged around who could participate in the process (e.g., the minimum voting age) and what projects to fund (Russell & Jovanovic, 2020). PB participants wanted to achieve equitable outcomes through the PB process and expressed their frustration with city officials' desire to maintain unequal power systems. The PB process aided participants in reframing public discourse around city planning by moving social justice concerns to the center of those planning discussions (Russell & Jovanovic, 2020), showing that communication during PB can foster social justice sensibilities among participants, despite government officials' resistance to such discourse.

Given the prior research conducted on PB, this study sought to make several contributions to the literature. First, the study was intended to expand the equity-driven model of PB by identifying characteristics associated with PB group deliberators' discourse about social justice. Second, drawing from prior work on subaltern struggles for justice, this study responded to the need to explore how the participation of people from oppressed populations influences deliberative discourse in PB (Meléndez & Martinez-Cosio, 2021), for, as explained below, those involved in the two PB processes that this study investigated disproportionately were from oppressed populations. By investigating such communication, this study sought to add to and expand in an important way scholarship about public deliberators' communicative behavior. Characteristics of deliberation that scholars have studied include expressions of agreement and disagreement (Black & Wiederhold, 2014), storytelling/narrative practices (Ryfe, 2006), and deliberative design and facilitation (Dillard, 2013; Reinig & Sprain, 2019; Sprain et al., 2014). However, little empirical research has explored the social justice characteristics of communication engaged in during public deliberation processes (Abdullah et al., 2016; for an

exception, see Townsend, 2021). This study, thus, sought to fill gaps in the study of communication, social justice, and PB, by identifying whether and how, during their deliberations, PB participants from oppressed populations communicated about social justice.

Research Methods

The data herein were derived from a larger mixed methods study, with the quantitative analysis published elsewhere (see Russell, 2021), and this article presenting findings derived from qualitative analysis. Throughout the article, I refer to the paid staff of the nonprofits implementing the two PB processes (e.g., facilitators and other staff) as ‘PB organizers’ and as my ‘community partners.’ The local residents/students who participated in the PB processes are referred to as ‘participants,’ or by the specific role they performed during the process (e.g., ‘budget delegate’ or ‘steering committee member’).

Research Sites

Cole Neighborhood

Denver’s Cole neighborhood is located in the northeastern area of the city and has approximately 4,800 residents (Shift Research Lab, 2017). Historically, Cole has been a thriving, working-class community for people of color. According to Shift Research Lab, as of 2017, the neighborhood is comprised of 52% Latinx, 32% White (non-Latinx), and 14% African American residents; 33% speak a language other than English at home; 15% of adults are not fluent in English; and 25% are foreign-born. Poverty is prevalent in that neighborhood, with 55% of households earning less than Denver’s median income of \$60,000; and 25% of all residents, 39% of the children, and 56% of the African American population living in poverty. Compared to the seven-county Denver metro area, Cole residents disproportionately are people of color, immigrants, and those with low income.

Since at least 2013, however, the demographic composition of Cole's residents has been changing, with more affluent, White Denverites moving into the neighborhood in search of affordable housing, and developers converting single-family properties into luxury townhomes and condominiums. Many Cole residents with whom I spoke during fieldwork and interviews were unhappy about the neighborhood's gentrification.

Given the tensions in the Cole neighborhood caused, in part, by gentrification, the PB organizers conducted targeted outreach in the community to recruit participants, and the Cole Has a Soul PB process successfully included many of the neighborhood's diverse residents. More than 200 people participated in the process, with African Americans, Asian Americans, and Whites represented proportionately to the Cole neighborhood's census demographics; Latinx residents underrepresented; and women overrepresented (Russell, 2021). Participants also disproportionately had low income, with 60% of budget delegates and half of steering committee members reporting household incomes below \$50,000 (Russell, 2021).

Many of the projects on the PB ballot reflected the needs of this diverse community, including a restorative justice project to address the harms of gentrification; a farmers' market; youth empowerment programming; an electronic community billboard; and an outdoor popup movie theater. The winning projects from the Cole PB process were the farmers' market, youth empowerment programming, and the popup movie theater.

Auraria Campus

The Auraria Campus is located in downtown Denver, approximately 3 miles southwest of the Cole neighborhood. The Campus serves more than 43,000 students and is home to three higher educational institutions—Colorado Community College (CCD), the University of

Colorado Denver (UCD), and Metropolitan State University (MSU)—that disproportionately serve first-generation, nontraditional-age, and/or working-class students of color.

Many Auraria Campus students perceived themselves as having little control of how their tuition and fees (the Campus’s primary sources of revenue) were spent. Auraria PB organizers implemented the process to address that concern and to encourage youth activism among a student population comprised disproportionately of those from oppressed populations. In total, approximately 1,300 people participated in Auraria PB, and, in every phase of Auraria PB, compared to Auraria Campus demographics, people of color and women were overrepresented or represented proportionately, and those with low incomes were overrepresented (Russell, 2021).

Projects on the Auraria PB ballot included a pilot program for textbook rentals; a Native and Indigenous student retreat; a concert on campus; an internet radio station; improvements to Wi-Fi in the library; an increase in the number of microwaves on campus;¹ a shelter at a bus stop near campus; a Campus Kitchen;² and a bike share program. The winning projects were the textbook rental pilot program, the Campus Kitchen, improvements to Wi-Fi in the library, a concert on campus, and more microwaves.

Methodological Approaches Informing the Study

Two methodological approaches that privilege researchers collaborating with community partners to address systemic inequalities informed this study: community-based research and activism and social justice communication research. First, *community-based research* (CBR) is ‘a partnership of students, faculty, and community members who collaboratively engage in

¹ The Auraria Campus had several microwaves available to students that they used to heat up meals brought from home. The microwaves were popular, with long lines of students often waiting to use them.

² At a Campus Kitchen, students use donated kitchen space and food to prepare nutritious meals for students and community members at low or no cost.

research with the purpose of solving a pressing community problem or effecting social change’ (Strand et al., 2003, p. 3). Importantly, CBR scholars seek community partners ‘who are oppressed, powerless, economically deprived, or disenfranchised’ (Strand et al., 2003, p. 3). For this study, my community partners included members of the nonprofit coalition that implemented the two PB processes, with the research intended to aid their campaign to make PB permanent in Denver.

The study also was informed by *activism and social justice communication research*, which Frey and Blinne (2017) categorized into two types: one that analyzes communication by activists to promote social justice, and another—‘communication activism research’ (Frey & Carragee, 2007)—that involves researcher-activists collaborating with activists to intervene into and reconstruct unjust discourses in more just ways, while documenting their systematic interventions. Although this study involved some aspects of the second type, including my partnership with and effort to aid the PB organizers’ campaign, my contributions did not rise to the level of systematic interventions, nor are they the focus of this study. This study, instead, describes and interprets the social justice discourse of steering committee members, budget delegates, and facilitators as they participated in the PB processes.

Data Collection

Following approval from my university’s institutional review board, two methodological procedures were employed to conduct this study: participant observation and interviews. My community partners requested, specifically, that I interview PB participants, as those partners intended to use in their campaign what they expected to be interviewees’ positive testimonies about PB. In contrast, my community partners were ambivalent about my use of participant observation, because they did not believe that it would generate useful findings for their

campaign; consequently, they did not provide input during the research process about my participant-observational procedures.

To conduct participant observation, community partners invited me to attend all events associated with these PB processes; in total, I observed 34 events, including committee meetings and public events (e.g., voting events). At those events, PB organizers introduced me to attendees as the PB processes' evaluator and as a university researcher, treating me as an 'invited expert' (Sprain et al., 2014, p. 153), and I informed attendees that, during the event, I would be taking notes on my laptop computer. In total, I generated 411 pages of typed, single-spaced fieldnotes.

Semistructured interviews were conducted with PB participants after their involvement in the process ended, with interviews occurring from mid-September 2018 to January 2019.

Anyone who participated in the PB processes at any stage and provided their email address to the PB organizers was invited via email to be interviewed. In total, I interviewed 14 people involved in these PB process: 6 steering committee members, 4 budget delegates, and 4 PB facilitators.

Interviewees' self-identified ages ranged from 18–70; 10 were women, and 4 were men; and 6 were Black, 5 were White, 2 were Asian, and 1 was Latinx. Interviews ranged from 30–60 minutes, and, on average, lasted 45 minutes. The recorded interview transcripts and my typed notes generated a total of 142 single-spaced pages.

Interviews were conducted using protocols developed collaboratively with my community partners. The protocols, in general, asked about interviewees' experiences during their PB process, perceptions of the extent to which deliberations were inclusive of PB participants from oppressed populations, and their overall evaluations of the process regarding its efficacy in promoting social justice.

Data Analysis

The interview transcripts and fieldnotes initially were subjected to a mid-level, thematic analysis that focused on interpreting people's meaning in context (Kaplan-Weigner & Ullman, 2015). After reading through all interview transcripts and my fieldnotes to (re)gain familiarity with their content, and assigning pseudonyms to participants, I employed a grounded approach to engage in open (or primary-cycle) coding of phrases in the data (Tracy, 2020). As I coded the transcripts and fieldnotes, I alternated between emic readings of the data and etic explanations (Tracy, 2020).

Following that initial round of coding, the data were subjected to macrolevel analysis (or secondary-cycle coding) that connected the findings from the mid-level analysis to broader social processes and meanings (Kaplan-Weigner & Ullman, 2015). Macrolevel analysis of qualitative data identifies people's ideologies (Kaplan-Weigner & Ullman, 2015), and, thereby, offers potential explanations for people's behaviors. That analysis, thus, involved placing the primary-cycle codes under new headings that represented significant themes (explicated in the findings below).

Throughout the data-analysis process, I employed triangulation across multiple data sources to ensure that my findings resonated with those involved in these PB processes (Creswell, 2013). In line with member-checking being approached best not as a single event completed at the end of studies but as an ongoing process that occurs at regular intervals during the research (Kaplan-Weinger & Ullman, 2015), I met a number of times with community partners during and after the PB processes concluded, to share my preliminary research findings, obtain their feedback, and subsequently refine the findings that are presented below.

Social Justice Discourse in Participatory Budgeting

The data analysis revealed three themes about which PB participants communicated during their equity-driven deliberations: participants' listening to marginalized voices, people from oppressed populations engaging in the PB process, and community members 'coming together' to benefit oppressed populations in their communities. Each of these themes are discussed below.

Listening to Marginalized Voices

The first significant theme that characterized PB participants' discourse—especially among Cole Has a Soul participants—was their desire to listen to the voices of marginalized Cole residents and Auraria Campus students regarding their needs and desires. Many participants perceived the PB process as a conduit for communicating with oppressed community members about the needs of their community and for speaking collectively about those needs to people in positions of decision-making power (e.g., local government officials and campus administrators).

The concept of 'voice' has been prominent in studies of participatory democracy (Milam & Heath, 2014), with Townsend (2021) explaining that, in the context of public deliberation, 'having a voice means being able to share what is meaningful, to express preferences and needs. . . . When people share their thoughts, they can feel valuable' (p. 12). Many of the people who participated in the two PB processes studied understood the importance of 'voice' in these ways, and they demonstrated their commitment to incorporating the views of community members who, previously, had been marginalized, acknowledging systemic forces (e.g., city governments' unresponsive and inaccessible public input processes) that prevented those community members' preferences about public spending from being heard by those in power.

Multiple participants commented about listening to marginalized voices when they contrasted the PB process with the 'business-as-usual' approach to budget allocation employed

by local government. Taylor, for example, a White budget delegate who had lived in Cole for more than 20 years, talked about the value of PB in the context of that neighborhoods' ongoing gentrification, saying, 'A lot of people feel like new people are taking over. They want to have a voice about what their neighborhood needs because they live there.' Susan, a Latina steering committee member, echoed that sentiment during her interview, saying that 'in an area that's being gentrified, [PB] has the opportunity to make the community voice be heard.' At a voting event for Cole Has a Soul, one resident remarked, 'I want them [city leaders] to be able to see, yes, we were here; yes, we did fight. We said something.' Many Cole Has a Soul participants, therefore, perceived the PB process as a means for communicating their resistance against greedy developers and their government cronies who were exacerbating inequalities in the Cole neighborhood.

Other PB participants also highlighted the historical neglect of the Cole neighborhood by powerful stakeholders who did not listen to residents' expressed concerns. Gabrielle, a Black PB participant, said that her neighbors always had been highly engaged in public affairs but that local government legislators were unwilling to listen to them:

People's involvement has always been there, but if you only get . . . one group making decisions, then all the people's voices cannot be heard. You would think [that because we live in] a democracy, . . . everybody should have a voice, but what I've come to find out is that's not true; decisions are being made in the boardroom without all the people [having a say].

The Cole Has a Soul PB process, thus, offered an opportunity for residents' voices—especially those from oppressed populations, given participants' demographics—to be heard by powerful

stakeholders and to have a positive impact on their neighborhood, a significant departure from the so-called ‘democratic’ processes offered previously to residents.

After Cole Has a Soul ended, during my interview with Tonya, a Black steering committee member, she reflected on how listening to marginalized voices connected to the exercise of collective power:

All of the concerns that the people I talked with had, I can lean on the PB process to get to the [city] councilperson and say, ‘This is what we learned the people want.’ I’ll be heard quicker than if I just come out as a resident and said, ‘Well, this is what I think people want’; [instead,] I can say, ‘This is what the people want because they told me face-to-face.’ PB gave me the power to [say] that, and the documentation.

By listening to residents’ voices through PB, Tonya believed that Cole Has a Soul legitimized residents’ concerns in the eyes of elected city officials. Many PB participants believed that the process enabled oppressed neighborhood residents to speak collectively about their community’s needs to elected officials who, previously, had marginalized those residents by neglecting and dismissing their voices. Many participants perceived listening in PB as an entry point of resistance to oppressive, monologic communication structures of institutionalized civic engagement, offering an opening to authentic participation in public affairs (Dutta, 2011).

Engagement in the PB Process

Perhaps unsurprisingly for a process intended to promote participatory democracy, PB participants frequently stressed the need for community members, especially those from oppressed populations, to be ‘engaged’ in the process. ‘Engagement’ in the PB process included attending PB events, committee members conducting outreach to diverse students/neighbors, submitting a project idea, voting for projects listed on the ballot, and/or serving as a steering

committee member and/or budget delegate. Participants also differentiated engagement in PB from participating in institutionalized forms of public decision making (e.g., attending government hearings, signing petitions sent to government officials, and voting in public elections).

During interviews and in committee meetings, numerous PB participants asserted that oppressed community members' engagement in the PB process would help to accomplish the social justice outcomes that resulted (e.g., funding community improvement projects that benefitted community members from oppressed populations and increasing their civic capacity). During her interview, Nicole, a Black facilitator, described PB as accomplishing 'wins' for the community, in part, because it promoted an engaged citizenry: 'To support communities in having a deeper understanding of . . . policy making and budget decisions is a win. It's a win for deeper democracy, and it's a win for a better engaged citizenry.'

Auraria PB participants also emphasized PB's ability to promote students' engagement in campus affairs, when they made the case for the process to be adopted permanently on the Auraria Campus. For instance, in September 2019, a year after Auraria PB concluded, some former participants attended a meeting to persuade members of the three student governments and campus administrators to implement PB permanently on the campus.³ During that meeting, Emma, a White woman and former budget delegate, touted PB's ability to engage students:

I know a lot of us here are [members of] student governments or student organizations—
or working some way engaging students on campus—so I know we all agree that it's

³Although, ultimately, PB was not adopted on the Auraria Campus, in 2021–2022, the City of Denver launched a citywide PB process that allocated \$1.7 million annually, due, in part, to the activism of former Cole Has a Soul and Auraria PB participants and organizers.

really important for our students to be engaged and feel like they can be heard, and know that they have an actual say on our campus, which is exactly what PB does for students. Multiple participants in both PB processes, thus, believed that oppressed community members' engagement in the process was essential for achieving the first social justice goal of making their voices heard.

Further illustrating the importance of engaging people from oppressed populations in the PB processes, some interviewees wished that they had engaged even more community members. When asked how Cole Has a Soul could have been improved, three steering committee members remarked that their outreach to Cole residents, especially those from oppressed populations, could have been more successful because of the relatively small number of neighbors who participated in the process. Only approximately 200 of Cole's 4,800 residents (4.17%) participated in Cole Has a Soul in any phase of the process, leading Amara, an Indian American⁴ steering committee member, to state that encouraging more people to submit a project idea, volunteer as budget delegates, and/or vote in PB would have improved the process, explaining:

What I mean is . . . getting more people involved in understanding what the process is and doing more community engagement around the PB process—to really get people to want to be involved at a different level than just another project out there.

Additionally, Reyna, an Asian steering committee member, remarked in a steering committee meeting in December 2018, shortly after the votes for projects on the ballot had been tallied, 'If I were to do [PB] again, I would . . . spend a lot more time engaging in large events to get to know more residents.' PB participants' discourse, thus, highlighted the importance of engaging

⁴Amara requested to be identified as Indian American instead of Asian or Asian American.

community members, especially those from oppressed populations, in the PB process, to ensure that the process resulted in socially just outcomes that met those community members' needs.

For steering committee members and budget delegates, a significant component of their engagement in the PB process, especially for ensuring that the process resulted in social justice outcomes, was talking with people from oppressed populations about how the Cole neighborhood or Auraria Campus could be improved. To achieve that goal, Cole Has a Soul organizers provided Spanish interpreters at all of their public events, including door-to-door canvassing to collect project ideas, and Auraria PB organizers printed ballots in both English and Spanish. Jocelyn, a Black Cole Has a Soul budget delegate, summed up these efforts by saying in a planning meeting, 'We'll promote dialogue that fosters action that builds relationships across racial and class lines.'

Further illustrating the importance of speaking with people from oppressed populations, at an August 2018 Auraria PB steering committee meeting, members brainstormed about campus groups to contact and encourage their engagement in the PB process; the final list included a student group of democratic socialists, several first-generation student groups, the Black Student Alliance, the Native American Student Association, and the disability services center. After the meeting, committee members contacted each of those groups at least once. During her interview after Cole Has a Soul had ended, Amara said that she wished she and her fellow steering committee members had done even more outreach to oppressed populations, especially young people living in the Cole neighborhood, who were underrepresented in all phases of the PB process:

There could have been more representation from the younger age groups that live in the community. It's challenging in this type of process to engage youths' voice in a

meaningful way, but I think that could have been done differently to encourage more youth engagement [in PB].

Lastly, many participants perceived engagement in PB as being distinct from institutionalized forms of civic engagement. For instance, at an event held in September 2018, Jeremiah, a Black facilitator for Auraria PB, told audience members, ‘I think we’re building a more effective way of engaging students than student government. I hope we use [PB] to democratize spending on campus.’

Cole Has a Soul steering committee member Reyna frequently talked at committee meetings about PB as a more empowering decision-making process than institutionalized forms. When I interviewed Reyna and asked her to elaborate on what made engagement in PB different from participating in other decision-making processes, her response echoed many participants’ views about PB:

If we’re going to do things differently than . . . Denver’s local government, then we need to act like it and make sure we’re doing that. We have a unique opportunity [through PB] to get out and talk to neighbors, whereas I don’t think the current Denver City Council members are hitting the streets like we are and talking to people.

Reyna concluded by claiming that the most rewarding aspect of PB was that ‘it was a different approach to civic engagement’ than institutionalized forms of public decision making because of its emphasis on listening to marginalized voices, promoting engagement by people from oppressed populations, and fostering community members coming together to promote social justice outcomes.

Thus, for participants, a significant value of PB was its potential to foster people’s engagement in their community, especially people from oppressed populations, even if some

populations (e.g., in Cole, young people) did not engage as much as PB participants desired. Participants' focus on engagement echoes the finding from Townsend's (2021) study of transportation planning meetings that the cultural discourse of deliberators from oppressed populations privileged 'being involved' (feeling connected to the social and civic world) and 'efficacy' (people's perceptions of their ability to accomplish a goal; Townsend, 2021, p. 14), but, in the present study, engagement differed slightly in that, for PB participants, it also meant involving in the process as many people from oppressed populations as possible.

This communication value of engagement also recognized the systemic barriers to public participation faced by oppressed community members, rather than simply blaming individuals for a lack of participation. As Michelle, a White facilitator, explained in her interview, the organizers' approach to PB asked 'How can we get them out to participate, and how can we make it fun and engaging?' Michelle elaborated that the communities in which PB was occurring had been involved in social justice activism before PB, but systemic exploitation that makes people work long hours for little pay, and shallow, institutionalized public input processes, often cause people to feel that their participation in civic affairs is not worth their time. Hence, PB was meant to offer an alternative form of 'engagement' in public affairs, as one connected to popular politics—an arena where the disenfranchised often 'find their voices' (Dutta, 2015, p. 138). Because these PB processes were implemented independent of governing institutions among communities sidelined by those institutions, many participants perceived PB as more legitimate than institutionalized forms of public participation, and so they differentiated participation in PB from those institutionalized forms of public participation by emphasizing 'engagement' among people from oppressed populations, further bolstering the trustworthiness/authenticity of the process to community members.

Community Members Coming Together

Local communities are important sites of struggle against oppression because ‘Community emerges as the space through which democracy is negotiated, amid cultural practices that give meaning to democratic participation and that emerge as avenues for negotiating with the dominant structures and institutions of the state’ (Dutta, 2015, p. 138). A communication practice during these PB processes meant to promote feelings of community connection was ‘coming together.’ Many participants believed that community members’ engagement in PB would strengthen relationships with each other through ‘coming together’ to promote social justice outcomes. As explained below, participants maintained that coming together through the PB process would increase participants’ understanding of one another, feeling of being connected to their neighborhood/campus, and their civic engagement. In line with that belief, and/or, perhaps, because they understood implicitly the importance of modeling the relational coming together of community members that they wanted the process to achieve, multiple steering committee members and budget delegates prioritized developing strong relationships with one another.

With regard to the effects of the PB process on Cole’s residents, Sydney, a Latina PB participant, said that ‘community [members] coming together and not just saying what they want but actually implementing and doing something together . . . builds power, collectively, to be able to take more and more action.’ Maya, a Black facilitator, remarked during her interview that the most rewarding aspect of the PB process was ‘seeing community [members] come together [through PB].’

One of the most vocal proponents of the PB process promoting Cole community members coming together was Jocelyn, an African American woman who had founded and

continued to run a small nonprofit organization that implemented restorative justice dialogue circles in that community. At the first PB meeting that she attended, she explained that she was participating in this PB process because ‘I would like to be part of the change, bringing the diverse community together, [as] I feel, like, it has separated, and we need to bring that diversity together.’

Later, in October 2018, Cole Has a Soul steering committee members and budget delegates met to decide which projects to place on the PB ballot. Jocelyn, a budget delegate, had developed what she called a ‘gentrification listening project’ that would use restorative justice principles and practices to help Cole residents address harms caused by the gentrification of their neighborhood. When asked to justify including that project on the ballot, Jocelyn said the project addressed ‘the need [for Cole residents] to listen to each other. We can’t enjoy [the neighborhood] if we’re not coming together to understand each other more.’ Although Jocelyn wanted her community to thrive economically, she did not want it to come at the cost of decreased social cohesion among residents. She argued that by promoting community members’ ‘listening’ to and ‘understanding’ one another, ‘across racial and class lines,’ her gentrification listening project would help Cole residents to ‘come together’ and, thus, was worthy of being included on the PB ballot, which it was (although it did not garner enough votes to receive funding).

The belief that PB would lead to community members coming together also was salient in Auraria PB participants’ recruitment of people to serve on the steering committee. For instance, in July 2018, at one of the first meetings of the process, as an icebreaker, Jeremiah, the facilitator, asked members to share why they had joined the committee. Mario, a Latino CCD student, said that he looked forward to ‘making connections with like-minded individuals.’

Barbara, a White UCD student, said, 'I'm excited about seeing the tri-campus [community] come together; that's never happened before.' She then looked at Mario and said, 'You're one of only four people I've met from CCD,' and followed up by saying that she looked forward to getting to know him, signaling her interest in meeting campus members who were outside her current social networks.

Hagelskamp, Schleifer et al. (2016) expressed concerns that PB, often times, is dull and time-intensive, asking participants, for example, to spend hours vetting project proposals, which can be a barrier to recruiting people with low income because they may be unwilling to spend their limited money and time (e.g., expenses for bus fare and childcare, and time away from work and/or family) to attend PB meetings/events. Occasionally, Cole Has a Soul and Auraria PB were tedious and time-intensive, but the opportunity to forge interpersonal bonds through PB appeared to motivate the participation of people from oppressed communities.

Conclusions

The findings offer several theoretical and practical insights. First, they extend the equity-driven model of PB advanced by Pape and Lerner (2016). Although Pape and Lerner identified some PB process rules that could advance social justice (e.g., allocating funds to programmatic and capital projects, extending the idea collection phase beyond initial brainstorming, and increasing opportunities for interaction between PB participants and community members who did not participate in the process), they did not identify specific discourse supporting that goal. This study identified three specific themes about which PB participants communicated that did support that goal: listening to marginalized voices, being engaged in the PB process, and the process resulting in community members 'coming together.' Communication of/about those themes promoted equity in terms of recruiting people from oppressed populations to participate

in the PB processes and benefiting their communities by foregrounding the concerns of people from oppressed populations and systemic barriers to their full and equal participation in civic life. Those findings both support other evidence showing the importance of voice and engagement for fostering the participation of people from oppressed populations in public deliberation processes (Townsend, 2021), and offer insight about how the participation of people from oppressed populations influences deliberative discourse in PB (Meléndez & Martinez-Cosio, 2021).

Lastly, the study has implications for the possibility of PB to serve as a tool of liberation that advances social justice (instead of a globalized conduit for neoliberal ideology). The communication values of listening and ‘engagement’ functioned to promote deep, authentic participation in the PB processes by people from oppressed populations, so that the processes would be perceived as legitimate, first and foremost, by fellow community members, and, secondarily, by city officials and school administrators. These findings support prior research that listening is an entry point of resistance to oppression (Dutta, 2011), and the implementation of the PB processes by local community-based organizations— independent of institutionalized public participation processes— further bolstered participants’ perceptions that the process could be trusted to address their communities’ needs. Thus, the study offers an example of two public deliberation processes that functioned as sites of popular politics, where many residents believed they were able to make their voices heard by other community members and city/school officials, as well as intervene against exploitative social structures (Chatterjee, 2004; Dutta, 2015). The communication practice of ‘coming together’ through PB demonstrates the importance of community and interpersonal connections when implementing PB, especially if PB is to advance social justice, because it is in community that people from oppressed

populations may negotiate and resist hegemonic structures, thereby prefiguring a more just world (Dutta, 2015).

Before discussing practical implications, a discussion of the limitations of these PB processes and the study are warranted. First, despite the successes of the PB processes analyzed in this article, they were relatively circumspect. Each process allocated just \$30,000, which only began to address the material needs of the communities discussed in this article, and the processes lasted about half as long (4 months) as a typical PB process in North America (8–9 months; Hagelskamp, Rinehart et al., 2016). In both PB processes, Latinx participation was not representative of broader community demographics, and, although translation and interpretation were provided for PB materials (e.g., ballots) and events, most participants were fluent in English. Thus, the English language may have been a hegemonic force that the PB organizers and participants struggled to overcome.

The limitations of the study suggest several potential directions for future research. First, this study was focused on PB implementation in the United States, and so future studies in other countries may yield different results and warrant scholarly attention. Second, the thematic analysis used in this study privileges points of agreement (rather than points of contention/conflict) among participants; future studies could explore competing or conflicting interests within the communities where PB is implemented (e.g., between and/or among residents, organizers, and/or city/school officials). Third, this article devoted little attention to the deliberative design of these PB processes, and future studies could explore the roles of process rules and facilitation techniques in fostering social justice outcomes (e.g., the ways process rules and facilitation foster or inhibit communication about the needs of people from oppressed populations).

Finally, the findings have important implications for PB practice. First, practitioners should emphasize PB's ability to bring community members together by centering the concerns of people from oppressed populations, and to develop interpersonal ties among PB participants that later can be leveraged for community engagement that involves organized, collective (rather than atomized, individual) political action. This recommendation could be accomplished by using values of 'coming together' in promotional materials for PB (e.g., 'Participatory Budgeting: Coming Together to Benefit Our Community'), or designing the process in such a way that increasing feelings of solidarity and connection to each other and/or the local community is an explicit goal/purpose of the PB process (e.g., by writing that goal into the rulebook for the PB process). PB facilitators and practitioners can promote interpersonal ties among PB participants (especially steering committee members and budget delegates) by starting meetings with icebreakers, providing time for participants to share stories from their personal lives, or organizing social hours where participants can converse casually.

Second, practitioners should stress these themes when recruiting PB participants from oppressed populations, especially listening to marginalized voices, which explicitly demonstrates how PB is a departure from institutionalized public participation processes that, too often, are discriminatory. For instance, PB practitioners can communicate their desire to listen to community members by conducting door-to-door canvassing for project ideas, and ensuring that canvassers are fluent in residents' preferred language (e.g., the Cole neighborhood has a large population of people who speak Spanish and limited English fluency). Furthermore, when interacting with local residents, PB practitioners could acknowledge the hegemonic discourses that have marginalized specific populations (e.g., redlining, urban renewal, or other neoliberal development schemes), and then emphasize that PB is a departure from those practices (e.g.,

stressing that local residents, rather than politicians or wealthy elites, will decide how to spend the PB funds). By highlighting these themes related to listening, PB implementers will be better able to recruit and retain those from oppressed populations who participate in this deliberative process to achieve socially just outcomes for their communities.

Third, the findings suggest that PB practitioners may want to explore ways to implement PB independent of governing bodies. A typical PB process in the United States is funded and implemented by a municipal government or school administration, but these findings suggest that, for PB to advance social justice, implementing the process independently from institutional governing systems may increase the perceived legitimacy of the process by people from oppressed communities, as well as generate material benefits for those populations. A municipal government could fund PB but provide the money to an independent commission, nonprofit organization, or other nongovernmental organization that then implements the process. This type of arrangement could allow the implementing organization greater flexibility in designing a PB process that incorporates culturally appropriate rules, as well as mitigate the co-optation of the process by powerful stakeholders, as has been documented in other U.S. PB processes (Russell & Jovanovic, 2020). These recommendations, in combination with the equity-driven model of PB, provide opportunities for residents at the margins of hegemonic society to exercise meaningful influence on their communities and promote social justice.

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