

A Sense of Ownership in Community Development: Understanding the Potential for Participation in Community Planning Efforts

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The term “sense of ownership” is frequently cited as a significant characteristic of community development. While there is increasing use of the terms ownership or sense of ownership, there is a paucity of research regarding what these terms mean, how this body of knowledge influences community development, and the various approaches that can be applied in contemporary community research and practice. A sense of ownership in community development is described as a concept through which to assess whose voice is heard, who has influence over decisions, and who is affected by the process and outcome. Applying the concept of ownership can determine how the strategic interests and actions of individuals or organizations contribute to community development efforts. In addition, the potential for ownership can be understood in part by examining the capacity for and quality of trust. Implications are discussed regarding how the concept of ownership advances the current field, specifically regarding community development research and practice.

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Enhancing public involvement in community planning and development efforts has been promulgated on developing and acquiring “buy-in” which signifies the support, involvement or commitment of interested or affected parties to a community development proposal, plan, strategy or decision. Buy-in is a term used in securities markets, business management and even poker playing to signify the commitment of stakeholders to a decision by agreeing to and supporting the formulation of a process with an interest and influence in the outcome. The term ownership (or sense of ownership) is increasingly cited as a critical element in determining the potential for buy-in and, consequently, public involvement in community planning and development efforts. For example, the term ownership has been specifically used in community development contexts (Simpson, Wood, & Daws, 2003; Bessant, 2005; Bowen, 2005; Zimmerman & Meyer, 2005). The term is popular in environmental policy literature and in scholarship associated with sociology, education and curriculum development, and organizational behavior (Schneider, 1985; Barufaldi, 1987; Ehrmann & Lesnick, 1988; Gusfield, 1989; Mattessich & Monsey, 1992; Hajer, 1995; Himmelman, 1996; Kearney & Kaplan, 1997; Loseke, 1999; Wondelleck & Yaffee, 2000; Buyukdamgaci, 2003; Brian, 2004). As with the term “sense of place,” the term ownership is also referred to as “sense of ownership”

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(Watt, Higgins, & Kendrick, 2000; Doe & Khan, 2004; Harvey & Reed, 2007). The above body of literature is loosely predicated on the assumption that if individuals are intimately and authentically engaged, dedication to the process and outcome will be created, leading to greater chances of political support and implementation.

Yet, in these contexts there is little in the way of precise definition explaining what the concept of ownership is, how it can be applied in the context of community development and how it can be expanded or improved. While Lachapelle and McCool (2005, 2007) have presented material to define and present examples of sense of ownership, this article expands these previous discussions and presents a more formal description and explanation as applied to community development. In this article, the following questions are raised: 1) What essential characteristics define a sense of ownership? and 2) How can the concept of ownership be applied in community development research and practice? Gaining a better understanding of the many characteristics of ownership in a planning process is critical toward furthering the study and application of community development since it can lead to better analysis of complex interactions, greater chance of public involvement, and increased support toward the realization of community development goals.

The Three Essential Characteristics of a Sense of Ownership

The term ownership has traditionally been associated with exclusive control of physical or intellectual property embodied in legal rights referred to as title. Historically, ownership and property rights were codified in Roman law, evolving to comprise common law in early modern England in part through the influence of John Locke who argued property ownership was a natural right derived through labor (Clark, 1982). The fifth and the fourteenth amendments to the United States Constitution explicitly provide for the protection of private property ownership. Indeed, ownership of property is often considered the defining characteristic in the development of the capitalist socioeconomic system.

Just as ownership is a defining characteristic of many Western cultures, it can also be a defining characteristic in community development research and practice. As with the term buy-in, the term ownership denotes a figurative depiction that is used often, can be contextually applicable and has the potential to be conceptually robust regarding community development. While there is little formal explanation of ownership in the forementioned scholarly sources, there are several central themes that emerge and link this diverse scholarship. A sense of ownership is proposed and applied to community development research and practice based on three essential characteristics and related questions:

1. A sense of ownership in process (who has a voice and whose voice is heard?);
2. A sense of ownership in outcome (who has influence over decisions and what results from the effort?);
3. A sense of ownership distribution (who is affected by the process and outcome?).

This first characteristic involves the processes by which voices are heard and considered legitimate or valid. Through a focus on ownership in process, community development research and practice can construct methods that explicitly examine who has a voice in a development process and, more importantly, whose voice is heard. Whose voice is heard in any development effort often determines who defines the problem or situation. Consequently, the framing of problems drives underlying assumptions, guides strategies taken, and ultimately influences the quality and acceptability of a plan (Bardwell, 1991; Gray, 2003). Problems can be defined or framed so as to either benefit or harm individuals in terms of claims, meanings, legitimacy and feasibility. The privileging of

particular ideas, forms of knowledge, and definition of problems influences interactions between individuals and the choices they make to address a situation. How a problem is viewed (i.e., the lens used to analyze the situation) influences the strategies taken toward addressing the problem. Situations viewed through conflicting lenses will tend to be antagonistic. The lens used by those with technical/expert/scientific skills can operate at cross-purposes to those with traditional/experiential/lay knowledge and can serve to form a divide in many development efforts (Escobar, 1995; Williams & Matheny, 1995; Fischer, 2000; Watts, 2000; Ferguson & Derman, 2005).

The term “scientism” is defined as the belief that science is inherently capable of solving almost all human problems and often serves as a mechanism of control as to whose voice is heard and considered legitimate (Caldwell, 1990). Similarly, Scott (1998) has applied the term “high modernist ideology” to situations where experts hold “little confidence ... in the skills, intelligence, and experience of ordinary people” (p. 346). In some situations, science functions according to what Williams & Matheny (1995) have referred to as a “pathology of power” (p. 53). Power in this sense is reified through the definitions or pursuits of legitimate knowledge and the emphasis on claims of “validity” of information. The control of knowledge and information in terms of how certain information is gathered, presented, disseminated, and ultimately distorted, can be a significant source of power in community development situations. Yet, the desirability of conditions such as urban renewal or the need for expanded public transportation are value judgments that, while informed by science, are ultimately determined by factors of social and politically desirability. When definitions are imposed, resistance follows, and not having an ability to have one’s voice heard diminishes a sense of ownership in a situation.

A sense of ownership would tend to challenge the notion of what Yankelovich (1991, p. 9) has called the “culture of technical control,” by analyzing the myriad voices in a community development situation, particularly those that are suppressed. A sense of ownership places the process of gathering information and the privileging of who has a voice and whose voice is heard as essential to understanding cause and effect in community development. An ability to legitimately have one’s voice heard is related to how a problem or situation is defined and whether there are avenues or forums for individuals to listen to and negotiate the definitions of others. For this reason, a sense of ownership explicates the various opportunities that might be available or concealed for individuals to listen to and negotiate the definitions of problems and the methods used to address those problems.

The second characteristic of a sense of ownership involves who has influence over the outcome through decision making. The sense of ownership provides an explicit focus on the influence or direct authority over decision-making and the execution of actions. Negotiating a redistribution of influence or direct authority over decision-making is complex, particularly within the legal structures guiding community development and scales of planning that involve local, regional, state, federal, and even international jurisdictions and sovereignty. While citizens may have a desire or feel a sense of responsibility to influence or authorize decisions, they may not have opportunities to do so. Consequently, a sense of ownership is predicated on power and empowerment, two terms that have received ample discussion in theoretical and applied community development scholarship (Harley, Stebnicki, & Rollins, 2000; Craig, 2002; Pigg, 2002). As Dahl (1957) has noted, “the concept of power is as ancient and ubiquitous as any that social theory can boast” (p. 201). Indeed, some degree of influence over decision making is fundamental to achieve a public presence in community development.

In any community development effort, ownership over the decision making process, however little is conceded or allocated to citizens, will be seen as a political task fraught with both legal and social obstacles. Allowing citizens to act in a consultative role without any form of delegated power has been referred to as a gesture of “tokenism” (Arnstein,

1969, p. 217). Yet for Kemmis (2001), influence in outcome has been a fundamental issue since “democracy means nothing if it does not mean making decisions...that is the most strongly democratic statement a group of people can make” (p. 153). Similarly, Barber (1984) has surmised:

Give people some significant power and they will quickly appreciate the need for knowledge, but foist knowledge upon them without giving them responsibility and they will display only indifference. ...people are apathetic because they are powerless, not powerless because they are apathetic. (pp. 234, 272)

While direct decision-making authority may be a practical or, in some cases, a legal impossibility, there are other more tacit forms of promoting a sense of ownership in outcome such as providing information, promoting alternative public participation processes, encouraging different forms of knowledge to be used in planning, and allowing more interaction between scientists, developers and citizens. For this reason, a sense of ownership emphasizes analysis of decision-making dynamics, i.e., those with an ability to influence outcome and the reasons why.

The third characteristic of a sense of ownership concerns its distribution across various social, political and ecological scales. This last characteristic involves analysis of those who are affected by a decision as well as how the effects of a decision are distributed, accepted and “owned,” both spatially and temporally. This characteristic of a sense of ownership can involve not only the individuals in the physical place where a community development effort originates but larger scales of engaged citizens linking regional, national and even international interests. A sense of ownership will also focus on temporal dimensions. In other words, applying the concept of ownership moves the focus from present to future generations where heirs of a community development effort would reap the costs or benefits of any decisions, for example, if development efforts result in ecological impacts that must be addressed by future inhabitants of a community (e.g., global warming).

Temporally, a sense of ownership explicitly evaluates effects from actions and identifies those who create a condition (e.g., the present generation that uses fossil fuels) and those who own it (e.g., future generations who inherit the repercussions of fossil fuel use). Similarly in a spatial sense, a sense of ownership explicitly evaluates effects from actions and identifies those who create a condition (e.g., the use of private automobiles contributing to air pollution in an urban environment) and those who own it (e.g., low income residents who cannot afford a car but inherit the repercussions of private automobile use). A sense of ownership makes explicit the connections and interactions, both spatial and temporal in community development research and practice.

Furthering the Development of a Sense of Ownership

While there are myriad methods of understanding this concept, it is proposed here that the potential for ownership can be understood in part by gauging the quality of trust in a community development effort. In other words, a high degree of trust in a community development process or outcome can help to determine the potential for ownership. As the role of trust may not be clear, the following section presents a discussion of how trust can be applied in the study and application of ownership.

Understanding Ownership through Trust

The potential for ownership in community development research and practice can be understood in part through recognizing characteristics of trust. Studies of trust are often predicated on analyzing the structure of relationships (Weber & Carter, 2003; Seligman,

1997), the convergence of definitions such as the amount of acceptable risk, (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998) and agreement on legitimate authority (Williams & Matheny, 1995; Forester, 1989). Examples are provided below.

There is general agreement that trust in community development has the potential to enhance individual or group learning, build relationships between citizens, improve relations with government, influence creative solutions, teach citizenship, inculcate civic virtue, allow dialogue to flourish, promote fairness in procedural efforts, reduce conflict, validate multiple forms of knowledge, and facilitate effective responses to future crises (Rousseau et al., 1998). There is also general agreement on the importance of trust in terms of social, economic, political and psychological factors that influence how humans act and interact (Wolff, 1950; Seligman, 1997; Newton, 2001). To be clear, trust is not a behavior (for example, cooperation), nor a choice (such as risk taking) but rather an underlying condition responsible for such actions. For this reason, trust has several broad characteristics that relate to understanding the potential for ownership.

First, as suggested by Weber and Carter (2003), trust can be understood by examining relationships between individuals since trust is built and based upon repeated interactions and fulfillment of expectations leading in turn to an ability to act in confidence, with reliance and faith on the individual's integrity or character. Consequently, trust "emerges out of the interactions between individuals and it serves to order these relationships by influencing interaction" (Weber & Carter, 2003, p. 5). This form of trust, often referred to as relational or interactional trust, develops from repeated interactions and past cycles of exchange, risk-taking, and fulfillment of expectations thus leading to reciprocal arrangements (Seligman, 1997; Weber & Carter, 2003). Repeated interactions strengthen the willingness to rely on others and "expand the resources brought into the exchange" (Rousseau et al., 1998, p. 399). Like a feedback loop, positive interactions lead to increasing interdependence and the likelihood that new opportunities and initiatives will be pursued. For Rousseau et al. (1998, p. 400), relational trust can lead to a shared identity involving "shared information, status and concern" and, thus, is viewed as "trust at its broadest." Recognizing relational forms of trust may lead to a better understanding of whose voice can be heard, who can influence decisions, and the potential for ownership in the process and outcome of a community development effort.

Contrasting meanings or definitions of a community issue or situation can also be linked to the quality of trust. This is particularly acute with regard to definitions of risk. In their cross-disciplinary study of trust, Rousseau et al. (1998) found that risk must be present in order for trust to exist. Risk is defined as the perceived probability of loss derived from the confidence of predicting uncertainty from past and present knowledge, values, and perceptions. The methods of integrating acceptable risk are often subjective and based on judgments, some shared and some divergent. Risk can be seen as socially constructed and, thus, requires negotiation within the context of a specific problem. When defining acceptable degrees of risk, a disagreement can lead to exploitation of power and authority since, as Slovic (1999) has explained, "whoever controls the definition of risk controls the rational solution to the problem at hand. ...Defining risk is thus an exercise in power" (p. 699). A focus on trust in community development research and practice would draw attention to how various voices view risk, which voices conflict through their respective definitions of the perceived probability of loss, and, ultimately, how decisions concerning risk are made.

Trust is also linked to agreement on legitimate authority. As stated above, disagreement on definitions of risk can influence power balances creating the perception that certain authoritative sources are illegitimate. For Forester (1989), the importance of validating decision making authority in planning is critical since this authority constantly "establishes, refines, and recreates and thus reproduces, social relations of trust or distrust" (p. 71).

Perception of legitimate authority can influence trust through such mechanisms as neutral facilitators, clear process rules, and unimpaired sharing of data and information (Hudson, 1979). Consequently, understanding the degree of trust of those in control of a community development effort can influence the potential for ownership in the process and outcome. Taken together, a better understanding of trust in terms of the quality of the relationships, contrasting definitions such as the amount of acceptable risk, and agreement on legitimate authority, can help to explain or reveal the potential for broad ownership in community development research and practice.

Conclusion

While the terms ownership and a sense of ownership have been applied in various disciplines and contexts, no formal or comprehensive description and explanation has yet been offered in the context of community development. Through a synthesis of various studies, a detailed discussion of a sense of ownership based on three characteristics has been presented as: 1) ownership in process (which asks who has a voice and whose voice is heard?), 2) ownership in outcome (which asks who has influence over decisions and what results from the effort?), and 3) ownership distribution (which asks who is affected by the process and outcome?).

The application of ownership in community development research and practice advances the field by making explicit specific characteristics that can determine the potential for broad public participation and the quality of a community development process and outcome. While there are likely many variables which contribute to a better understanding of the potential for ownership, this work has detailed the influence of trust on a community development effort. Since trust involves an understanding of the structure of relationships, a convergence of definitions (such as risk,) and agreement on legitimate authority, trust can help provide a better understanding for the potential of ownership in a community development effort.

However, understanding the potential for ownership in community development research and practice is not limited solely to studies of trust. For this reason, further discussion and study of the concept of ownership should be encouraged and implemented in various contexts and at different scales. Ultimately, through the lens of ownership, community development research and practice can draw out both observable or more nascent characteristics of community interactions to obtain a more complete understanding of how strategic interests influence and provide support for and resistance to public participation in community development efforts.

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