

Community Participation in the South African Local Government Dispensation: A Public Administration Scholastic Misnomer

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Abstract: *The interpretation, application and understanding of community participation particularly in the South African local government discourse are obscured, thus, creating a more simplistic and superficial meaning for operationalization. This paper seeks to challenge the notion that community participation is a substitute in its ontological form and connotation with public participation. Many scholars in public administration have jumped into a dispensation of a bandwagon thus creating a misnomer in relation to a distinct nature of community participation and public participation which clearly undermines the authenticity of conception within the discipline and scholarship in general. Using a variety of qualitative secondary data collection and analytical techniques, this paper interrogates the misnomer in public administration scholarship in relation to the use and application of community participation specifically in local government. To successfully demonstrate this misnomer on the use, application and understanding of the concepts and the impact on scholarship, five selected articles on community participation and five others on public participation on local government published in the Journal of Public Administration (JOPA) were reviewed. The paper, therefore, concludes that public administration as a scientific discipline, with the influential role it has must seek to forge relations with public administration as a practice for the purposes of conceptualizing and operationalising concepts and terminologies. This will ensure conciseness and avoiding contradictions which have potency of denting both scholarship and practice.*

Keywords: **Community participation, Public participation, Public Administration, Scholarship, Local Government**

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Introduction

The argument can be made that although public administration scholars tend to refer to community participation and public participation as synonyms with extrapolation to local government. The two are dissimilar in application and meaning. While community participation can be related to the Western ideology catering the elite (Midgley 1986), public participation is inclusive of the general public. According to Masango (2009), the elite are the people who occupy top positions in the highest and resource-rich political, government, economic, professional, communications and cultural institutions. He further alludes that such elites are different from the general public which have trust on the church and other social institutional settings rather than the processes of government. What creates the illusion in scholarship can be related to obscurity in the meaning of the concepts public and community. While van Dijk and Thornhill (2011) acknowledges challenges in conceptualising and finding a consensual definition of what comprises the public, it can be argued that there can be many publics within a public (Warmer 2002; Eriksen 2004). Similarly, there exist a number of definitions on community participation which can be misleading particularly in the discourse of public administration. This is so because of the failure to conceptualise the word community and its origin in relation to its operational use. It is as a result that scholars in the field have quickly jumped into a bandwagon and grapples with forging their own conceptualisations without a theoretical basis which have not particularly been identified or simply ignored.

This paper seeks to unpack different dimensions of conceptualisation by providing the ontological basis of the concepts of community participation and public participation in relation to public administration scholarship with a view of clearing the uninformed misnomer and scholastic-ills in the South African local government arena. This paper argues that, the authenticity of the discipline is somehow delegitimised by failure to relate theory with practice in the application of concepts with specific reference to community participation and public participation. With this in mind, the paper acknowledges the limited sources for conceptual theory to guide the development of the discipline particularly in a dispensation era where public administration scholarship in relation to local government is so dynamic and filled with complexities (Nkuna & Sebola 2012; Nkuna & Sebola 2014) while in the interim should be the constituent closer to the people (Mafunisa & Xaba 2008). This paper seeks to uncover the mischievous use, understanding, and application of community participation and public participation within the public administration discourse within local government by zooming into the ontological and epistemological origins of the terminology compared to the ideals and realities on the ground.

Drawing Differences between Community and Public

Drawing a convincing argument on the differences between what constitute a community and a public is a major challenge for the purposes of constructing and argument. Community participation and public participation further requires one to provide a basis by a way of contemplating and conceptualising the meanings of the terms community and public and relate them to the scholarship discourse of public administration. In the South African context which in nature is so dynamic and

complex due to a number of variety of tribes, races and languages, the connotation of the concept public is quarry to variety of meanings of the word public in general. The Oxford English Dictionary (2014) is so vague and abstruse in alluding to the 'true' and conceptual meaning of public as an exact opposite of private. This is a matter of contention and according to Martin (2004) it is a difficult qualification to understand why the 'thing' in question was named public in the first place. Coetzee (2010: 17) describe public as pertaining to, affecting the people at large or the community. It can be deducted from Coetzee's assertion that communities are a component of the public and thus not to be equated with one another. In Greek, community refers to 'fellowship' or a group of people coming together for mutual support and fulfilling their needs. A community can be described as a set of people who have commonalities such as same age, sex, ethnicity, tribe, race, faith, experiences, interest and cause (Stets & Burke 2000; Gutiérrez & Rogoff 2003). Membership of these communities can, therefore, constitute the general public. With large municipal boundaries in South Africa comprising inhabitants of diversified race, language, colour, tribes etc., the concept community and let alone community participation is therefore irrelevant and lacks logic in relation to application and practice in local government as it possess the potential of excluding general members of municipal communities .

For operational purposes Tshabalala and Lombard (2009: 397) refer to a community as defined by a ward system, which is a geographical area into which a municipality is divided for, amongst other purposes, elections. However, the ontological origin of the concept is way beyond the limitations as imposed by the operational definition. This argument is based on the fact that community as a concept can be used to describe social organizations (Malena et al. 2004) and arrangements which are often regarded as natural groupings based on ties of shared blood, language, history, and most importantly culture (Upadhya 2006). However Nzimakwe and Reddy (2008) and Tshabalala and Lombard (2009) share the same sentiment that participation at a municipal level can be achieved through a smaller demarcated wards where there exists a population having the features of a community. With this being said, scholars of public administration (see Ababio 2004; Nzimakwe & Reddy 2008; Phago 2008; Tshabalala & Lombard 2009; Ndevu 2011; Vivier & Wentzel 2013) have studied the complex and complicated nature of community participation in local government as the concept of community lends itself to a variety of interpretations. It has become so prominent in the discipline to either suffix or prefix community with terms such as community development, community capacity-building, community economic development and of course community participation. This tendency has created a misnomer in the public administration discipline and scholarship as the original ontological meanings are blindly ignored to befit into the discourse by concepts such as community involvement, engagement and consultation. This paper analyses a trend whereby scholars in their writings tend to emphasise the synonymy between community participation and public participation. This is done by a way of reviewing articles on the subject matter under study.

Reviewed Articles Published in the *Journal of Public Administration (JOPA)*

To successfully demonstrate the misnomer on the use, application and understanding of the concepts and the impact on scholarship, five selected articles on community participation and five others on public participation on local government published in the *Journal of Public Administration (JOPA)* with no predetermined sequence or logic were reviewed. Following is the table of the journal articles:

Table 1: List of sampled articles

Community Participation	Public Participation
Nzimakwe, T.I. & Reddy, P.S. 2008. Community participation in Ethekwini Municipality with particular reference to ward committees. <i>Journal of Public Administration</i> , 43(4.1): 667-679.	Mafunisa, M.J. & Xaba, B. 2008. Public participation and the Integrated Development Planning: the case of Limpopo Province. <i>Journal of Public Administration</i> , 43(3.2): 452-460.
Phago, K.G. 2008. Community participation during the 21 st century South Africa: modes, attitudes and trends. <i>Journal of Public Administration</i> , 43(2.1): 238-252.	Reddy, P.S. & Sikhakane, B.H. 2008. Public participation: a case study of ward committees in the Buffalo City Municipality. <i>Journal of Public Administration</i> , 43(4.1): 680-697.
Tshabalala, E.L. & Lombard, A. 2009. Community participation in the Integrated Development Plan: a case study of Govan Mbeki Municipality. <i>Journal of Public Administration</i> , 44(2): 396-409.	Draai, E. & Taylor, D. 2009. Public participation for effective service delivery: a local government perspective. <i>Journal of Public Administration</i> , 44(1.1): 112-122.
Ndevu, Z.J. 2011. Making community-based participation work: alternative route to civil engagement in the city of Cape Town. <i>Journal of Public Administration</i> , 46(4): 1247-1256.	Masango, R.S. 2009. Public participation: an imperative for sustainable democracy and effective service delivery. <i>Journal of Public Administration</i> , 44(1.1): 123-132.
Vivier, E. & Wentzel, M. 2013. Community participation and service delivery: perceptions among residents in Cape Town. <i>Journal of Public Administration</i> , 48(2): 239-250.	Mzimakwe, T. 2010. Public participation and engagement in local governance: a South African perspective. <i>Journal of Public Administration</i> , 45(4): 501-519.

With the reviewed articles having been identified, an analysis is sought to draw an analogy in application and comprehension between community participation and public participation with a view of identifying some of the trends in conceptualisation in the public administration discourse.

Community Participation and Public Participation

There is an existing need to clear the boundaries between the usage, definition, and application between the concepts community participation and public participation. This seeks to ensure the distinction or perhaps blending of the two while caution should be taken to undermine the legitimacy through a critique, analysis and the misnomer that it can create in public administration and the influence on practice. Clearly, with community and public being distinct terminologies, scholars particularly in the discourse are unenthusiastic to draw the line and at times refer to the concepts interchangeably. Ababio (2004) for instance, makes an uninformed mention to community-public-participation as a single concept without providing a theoretical base within which the assertion is supported. Similarly, Nzimakwe and Reddy (2008) tend to fiddle in-between community participation and public participation as if they refer to a similar phenomenon. This assertion is on the basis that the authors only focus on clarifying public participation while also referring to community participation,

involvement and engagement as principal themes of the paper. Commonly, articles reviewed for the purposes of this paper fail or somehow reluctant to provide a consolidated conceptualisation or at least elements of what community participation as opposed to public participation is. Muller (1994) and van Vuren (2002) (in Human Marais & Botes 2009) acknowledge the difficulties associated with defining community participation. The acknowledgement could be based on insufficient theoretical grounding of the concept.

However, McGee (2000) (in Human Marais & Botes 2009) defines community participation as a process through which the community can influence and share control over development initiatives, decisions and resources affecting them. On the other hand, Kotze (1997) (in Nzimakwe and Reddy 2008) defines community participation as the fundamental ethical principle for allowing people to control actions that affect them while promoting sustainable socio-economic development, aspects of empowerment, communication and gender imperative. The definition fails to inculcate important concepts such as a community as a basic component of the term and other essential elements such as participation and the area or loci within which such participation takes place. The inclusion of concepts such as engagement, involvement and consultation adds to the flavour of confusion. Vivier and Wentzel (2013: 240) tend to shift the focus of the debate from community participation and attempt to forge relations with public participation. Evidently, the conceptualisation is based on the concept of public participation rather than community participation without providing analysis on how the latter is indoctrinated to the former. In scholarship where authors of conceptual papers rely mostly on secondary data and theoretical analysis of articles, with the trend of mischievously providing ungrounded theories, the field of public administration is facing a storm of 'sweeping' uniformed contentions. In his article titled 'Community participation during the 21st century South Africa: modes, attitudes and trends, Phago (2008) did not succeed in providing a convincing conceptualisation of community participation and unconsciously acknowledges the different societal sectors which form a community while failing to take into cognisance that such small segments make up a public in an environmental setting. Furthermore, he advocates the involvement of a community within a public realm which clearly should form part of the participatory process due to its inclusivity.

Moodley and Govender (2006: 831) in Phago (2008: 242) bring to the fore public consultation as a method of public participation and goals of public participation which theoretically shifted the focus from the discussion on community participation to public participation. Yet another misnomer in the public administration discipline? The answer to this question could be no, on the basis that scholars tend to make assertions and creating illusions by failing to demarcate, operationalise and conceptualise a subject under study. This is also evidenced by the interchanging use between community-based participation and public participation in Ndevu (2011). What is interesting is the fact that the author does not provide a theoretical delineation of community-based participation in which he backs with the conceptualisation of public participation. To this end, the paper focuses on providing different conceptual angles on how public participation should be theorized with a view to clearing a misconception in relation to community participation.

The introduction of a democratic dispensation in South Africa came with opportunities for the previously excluded for public participation for all citizens (Masango 2009). The Draft National Policy Framework on Public Participation of 2007 (in Mafunisa & Xaba 2008) defines public participation as an open and accountable undertaking in which individuals and groups within selected communities exchange their views and influence decision making processes. It remains an ontological contention that communities within selected municipalities forming a public (Draai & Taylor 2009: 114) takes part in the whole integrated process of decision making. Midgley (1986) supports this argument by contending that community participation only appeals to Western educated middle-class activists which do not always conform to the expectations of the ordinary citizenry. Thus in South African municipalities characterised by high levels of poverty and illiteracy, ordinary municipal citizens stand no chance of influencing decision making through participatory processes. This assertion is supported by Masango (2009) who creates a demarcation between the elite which is a community by its own right and the general members of the public; which he holds that such a distinction in practice may bear negative implications and not promote public participation.

Public participation is a proactive rather than a predetermined process where education is necessary from the political elite to foster the public to take charge of their own development initiatives that would promote a new mandate for local government (Draai & Taylor 2009; Tshabalala & Lombard 2009). The African National Congress (1994) (in Masango, 2009: 128) state that development is not about the delivery of goods to passive citizens rather about active involvement and participation and growing empowerment. With all this being said, it can be deduced that a democratic process powerful as public participation which lend itself to public administration scholarship characterised by erroneous usage, definition, analysis and understanding and is beyond the juxtaposed limited scope of community participation in the local government context. Clearly the public is bigger and comprises of communities within a public could prove more effective with the positive influence of scholarship to practice. Above all, public participation could lead to enhanced local government, effective and accountable service delivery (Reddy & Sikhakane 2008; Draai & Taylor 2009; Masango 2009; Mzimakwe 2010).

Placing Public Participation in the South African Local Government Context

The South African democratic local government dispensation is founded within the developmental notion wherein all service delivery sectors need to be coordinated (Manyaka & Madzivhandila 2013). South African municipalities have therefore become the 'development driver' through service delivery, poverty alleviation, infrastructure and economic development (Patterson 2008). In a democratic dispensation such as that of South Africa, the participation of communities and public participation in general plays an integral role in ensuring that the developmental mandate of local government is fulfilled. Such participation could also ensure that the citizenry of municipalities develops trust and a sense of belonging to development initiatives of their own. According to Pasquini and Shearing (2014), local government is a sphere of government generally most directly responsible for planning

and implementing adaption strategies suitable for the area in which they are located for benefiting the citizenry. Municipalities as government institutions in local government refers to a political portion that is established in terms of section 155 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa of 1996, and has control of local matters including the authority to raise taxes. Such is also established in terms of Section 12 of the Local Government Municipal Structures Act, 117 of 1998. Under the apartheid system South Africans were classified by the law as whites, blacks, coloureds and Indians (Mabokela & Mawila 2004). Local government was therefore also classified in terms of the racial segregation and division. Such a division meant that the provision of services was centred among the dominant race which was at that time white. This system marginalized non-white population groups from most aspects of national life and effectively side-lined them (Nnadozie 2013).

Public participation in local government was introduced as a democratic principle to correct the imbalances and injustices inflicted by the apartheid government to ensure that all sectors of societies are integrated and receiving equitable services. The end of apartheid and the first all-race elections of 1994 marked a turning point in the socio-economic and political landscape of South Africa. It must however be noted that the post-apartheid government has not fully made great inroads in terms of closing the gaps opened by the apartheid government particularly on matters of service delivery in local government. Service delivery protests among other challenges are indicative of the fact that South Africa has not yet fully recovered from the apartheid legacy (Mpehle 2012). Having adopted the service delivery challenges imposed by the apartheid government, the new democratic dispensation was expected to deal speedily with those injustices and imbalances by ensuring that the public fully and actively participate in local government affairs in relation to service delivery and ensuring good governance and accountability.

Public Participation in the Integrated Development Plan: An Illustration

Public participation is erroneously used interchangeably with community participation particularly giving inference to the Integrated Development Plan (IDP). Ababio (2004) believes that community participation and public participation mean one and the same thing. According to Mafunisa and Xaba (2008), public participation in the IDP exists only if the affected stakeholders particularly the municipal community integrally take part in decision-making and the implementation process. The notion of public participation whereby communities are central to decision-making and development should thus be centralised to the IDP model. The IDP in local government is used to create a platform for sharing ideas with the public affected by such development initiatives as proposed in the plan. Fox and Meyer (1995) defines public participation as the involvement of municipal communities in the wide range of administrative policy-making activities including the determination of levels of service, priorities in the budget, and the acceptability of physical construction projects in order to position government programmes towards the needs of the community support building and encouraging society cohesiveness. It is for this reason this paper argues that public participation in the IDP accommodates and accepts views not of a particular class but of the general citizenry who can be affected as opposed to a community.

To this end, it can be attested that public participation is not only the mere presence of the municipal communities, but active participation in the affairs of such a municipality in order to ensure that development and service provision are driven within the interests of the public. Public participation is a strong mechanism in a democratic South Africa and particularly in municipalities as a government sphere mandated with developmental duties and constituents closer to the people (Draai & Taylor 2009). It is also a core value to South Africa and a way of protecting and strengthening a relatively new democracy (Phago 2008; Vivier & Wentzel 2013). Public participation in the IDP necessitates the involvement of the municipal general citizens in decision-making, needs-identification and the ability to influence decisions and objections in cases of varying opinions. This should not be conceived to mean synonyms between public participation and community participation as it is often the ills of modern scholarship in the discourse of local government and particularly in public administration.

The Discourse of Public Administration and Scholarship

In order to provide a contextual clarity on the demised state of the public administration scholarship, it is equally important to have a comprehensive view of the scholastic inputs in relation to other distinguishing features while aiming to outline its relevance in the current discourse and the state of the discipline. Scholarship is vital for addressing matters of the modern bureaucracy citizens are faced with in addressing the balance between good governance and creating 'pure science'. It is also worth noting that P(public) A(administration) as both discipline and practice influence the development of each other. Scholarship therefore has the potential of improving levels and the quality of practice. While public administration can be understood as processes, organizations, and individuals carrying out rules and laws adopted through the branches of government (Russel 2000; Burkeley & Rouse 2004), Public Administration is an academic subject of study which seeks to understand, develop, criticise and improve the professional practice (Phago & Thani 2014). The discipline is associated with Woodrow Wilson who was the first to consider the science of Public Administration as an area of study and became influential. With a diversity of subject areas within the discipline, public administration scholarship can be defined as the provision of theoretical and empirical answers through primary and secondary data by a researcher in the field with a view of coming up with the most difficult resolutions (Lynn 2007). With that being said, it can be deduced that public administration scholarship seeks to influence through secondary and primary data the activities of government institutions, parastatals and agencies (Phago & Thani 2014).

Even though public administration seeks to influence practice, current trends in scholarship bring to the fore the necessities for scholars to be acquainted with practice so as to avoid contradictions necessitated by ideals in theory and the realities on the ground. Of course public administration scholars should reconsider the area of study and engage in discussions with related disciplines in an effort to enhance knowledge base of the discipline and to improve the quality and service rendering to society (Thornhill 2006: 793). Hence public administration is fiddled with a misnomer in an attempt to unpack concepts such as community participation and public participation. The culture of dependency

on a source is traverse of scholarship in the discourse of knowledge-generation and dissemination. According to Stout (2013) the field of public administration stands for substantive contributions to public affairs and therefore it is necessary to skill and develops scholars. This will enable them to grasp critical qualitative methodologies which are scientifically informed. Such stems from the reality that scholars in the discipline are mostly engaged in intellectual communities unaware of the lessons that could be learnt in other literatures.

Candler Azevedo & Albernaz (2010) identifies challenges inhibiting the development of public administration scholarship hence concepts such as community participation and public participation lend themselves to various and sometimes confusing conceptualisations. The first challenge is Epistemic Colonialism which is a critical adoption of administrative structures and techniques from elsewhere, especially the former colonial or current hegemonic power. As alluded before, the concept of community participation is closely related to Western ideologies of excluding the general public and accommodating the elite in participatory processes. This is heavy and questionable penetration of inappropriate foreign theory in public administration literature. The concept however lends itself to various and confusing interpretations and application in the scholarship discourse. The second challenge in the development of public administration scholarship is Epistemic Nationalism which refers to an undiscerning rejection of lessons from elsewhere. This form of a challenge requires scholars to engage with literature at an international perspective which could somehow reveal dimensions at which one might probe a phenomenon at various organisational contexts. The last challenge is Epistemic Parochialism which is a self-absorption to the extent that the intellectual community is unaware of the lessons that could be learnt from other literatures.

Perhaps, South African scholars in public administration must start engaging and writing in trans-disciplinary research areas and journals which is a primary step towards scholarship. With this being said, it can be alluded that there is a lack of scholarly renewal and very little theory development (Chipkin & Menty-Gilbert 2012) in the discipline. Public administration scholars pay little attention to formal and informal norms and organisational networks and the nature of state-society relationships.

Conclusion

In terms of upper ontology which relates to concepts supporting development of ontology referred to as meta-ontology, tracing the original conceptual forms of the concepts community participation and public participation had to be conducted. If participation in local government is referred to as 'community', it poses a danger of implying lack of inclusiveness to the municipal general public. Having interrogated the original theoretical meanings of community and public would suggest that participation through ward committees within municipalities representing diversity, public participation through communities would be suitable for operationalization and ringing a bell in practice. Discussions are, therefore, necessary among scholars on matters of controversy to ensure the authenticity and avoiding contradiction in the discipline. This is so because the state of public administration in South Africa has with no doubt deteriorated and characterised by repletion of subject

areas in research and discourse. Although the argument as sustained in the paper, tracing the ontological foundations of hard-to-define and contextualise concepts is necessary. While participation is inclusive of all communities, community participation only accommodates for the few elites at the expense of the ordinary citizens.

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