

Assessing the Impacts of Public Participation: Concepts, Evidence and Policy Implications

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The degree of attention being given to expanding ordinary citizens' roles in the policy process underscores the need to consider what effects these processes might and will have on policy decisions and on those who participate in them. This paper explores what is known about the extent to which the goals of public participation in policy have been met. It also examines the extent to which research evidence has been used by policy makers and public participation practitioners to design and improve public participation. The authors review the current state of knowledge about the impact of public participation on policy and civic literacy and identify different conceptual and methodological approaches to evaluation and their associated challenges. In addition to theoretical and conceptual literature, the authors also review published (English and French) empirical public participation evaluation literature and incorporate the results of key informant interviews with policy makers and public participation practitioners. The paper concludes with a discussion of the limits to evaluation and its uptake, and recommends strategies for promoting further practice and methods of public participation evaluation.

Some progress has been made in improving the rigour with which public participation evaluation is undertaken, chiefly through the development of more explicit and agreed upon evaluation criteria that have both process and outcome evaluation properties. However, much of the progress made has been focused on improving what are still largely formative evaluation studies (i.e. efforts to improve on existing practice and to assess public participation against an *a priori* set of objectives for what constitutes successful public participation).

There are a plurality of evaluation approaches and methods but it is possible to identify three main approaches: 1) *user-based* which assumes different participants have different goals and that evaluation must take these into account; 2) *theory-based* which is driven by theories and models of public participation and applies normative evaluation universally to any public participation effort; and 3) *goal-free* evaluation which is not constituted by any stated goals and is conducted in the absence of any theory. Most evaluation studies to date fall under the user-based category. Another distinguishing feature of public participation evaluation is the emphasis on either *process* or *outcome* evaluation.

Evaluation processes face a number of theoretical and practical challenges. First, the task of defining the end-point of a participation exercise for purposes of measuring effectiveness is often unclear. The ability to measure the institutional and societal impacts of the process, which can take many years, and may be difficult to disentangle from other events that are influential to the policy process, may be limited. Second, the public participation process may be well run according to some criteria but not others. How do we determine how much credence to give to an apparently acceptable, democratically-driven recommendation? The third big challenge lies with measurement criteria. Participant satisfaction is routinely used as a measure of success despite problems

associated with its interpretation. The issue of perceived versus actual impacts is problematic in any evaluation. Likewise the absence of properly tested measurement tools is another area in need of attention. The authors offer a conceptual map of public participation evaluation that includes context evaluation (public policy process), process evaluation (public participation process) and outcome evaluation (public policy, decision-makers and participants/general public) as an aid in understanding the different types and approaches to evaluation.

The research evidence from empirical evaluation literature is grouped under process-oriented research and outcome-oriented studies. The former reveals that “process matters” and that different types of public participation should be designed for different types of issues, decision-making conditions and groups of participants. What is much less clear is which of these contextual variables matter most and which processes are better suited to each of these different sets of arrangements.

Most of the outcome-oriented empirical research has focused on assessing the impacts of public participation processes on a range of citizen participant attributes. These studies have reported: increased levels of interest and knowledge of public issues; improved capacity for future public involvement; increased propensity for social bond formation; and improved trust of fellow citizens. There has been less research about the direct impacts of public participation on the policy process and political decision-making. What has been produced offers mixed and ambiguous results (e.g., public deliberation can produce outcomes that influence policy but the conditions under which this occurs are not easily identifiable). However, more recent literature finds a strong association between the broad acceptance of the decision outcomes and ‘processes in which agencies are responsive, participants are motivated, the quality of deliberation is high, and the participants have at least a moderate degree of control over the process’ (Beierle and Cayford 2002).

To supplement the literature review, the authors sought the views of policy makers / public participation practitioners working within various levels of government across Canada. Key informant interviews undertaken for the paper were organized around four issues: approaches to public participation design; approaches to evaluation; barriers to evaluation; and how to foster evaluation/improve its quality and use. The key themes emerging from the key informant interviews are captured below.

Approaches to evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluation is off the radar • Informal processes (most rely on participants’ satisfaction) • Interest in both process and outcomes • Innovation in some organizations (policy impacts assessed through careful documentation of decision-making processes throughout consultation)
Barriers to evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of time, resources, expertise • Lack of commitment to evaluation from senior management • Difficult to build evaluation capacity within organization (e.g. high turnover)
How to foster and improve evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need a ‘culture shift’ • An evaluation framework could be useful (but must be flexible and adaptable and integrated upfront) • Educate citizens about what constitutes good public participation

The literature consulted identified a dearth of good quality research evidence to inform either policy makers or public participation practitioners of the impacts of public participation on political discourse and/or democratic participation. The following research gaps are identified by the authors:

1. *Evaluate the context more rigorously.*
There is a remarkable convergence in the literature about the need for more rigorous study of the role context plays in the public participation process. Rowe and Frewer call for categories of *contextual attributes* that are associated with the implementation of public involvement to be developed (e.g., characteristics of the issue, attributes of the sponsoring organization, the type of decision being made, and the decision timeline).
2. *Define and categorize public participation mechanisms more consistently.*
This would help to improve the generalizability of the current evaluation literature.
3. *Link empirical research studies more closely with well-articulated hypotheses.*
Bridge the two solitudes between scholars and policy makers' interests by defining a set of organizationally derived hypotheses that can be tested within a public participation evaluation.
4. *Use multiple disciplinary perspectives and methods in evaluation design.*
Include interviews, surveys, documentation and observation.
5. *Make better use of real-world deliberative experiments to advance process and outcome evaluation.*
Organizations conducting public participation innovations should be open to collaboration with academic and NGO researchers to design and implement evaluation.
6. *Explore decision makers and their organizations more fully as context and outcome variables.*
The articulation of a clearer set of relationships between decision makers, their organizations and the influences they exert on each other through the design, implementation and evaluation of public participation is a useful avenue for further research.

Despite years of documenting public participation experiences, the practice of public participation evaluation is still in its infancy. More work is needed to reach agreement about a common set of evaluation criteria, the defining features of public participation mechanisms and how to categorize and evaluate the role of contextual variables in shaping and influencing public participation. To achieve these goals, the authors encourage forums that bring together public participation scholars, practitioners and policy makers from a variety of policy sectors and levels of governance for the purposes of general knowledge exchange, but also with the specific objectives of seeking

agreement about evaluation frameworks and criteria and in particular, the balance between generic and specific frameworks. Should they be successful, these exchanges may help to shift current views toward public participation evaluation from “frill” to “essential”.

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1 INTRODUCTION

There is much talk these days about involving ordinary citizens more definitively and directly in the policy process. Dialogue, deliberation and citizen engagement are increasingly familiar landmarks on the current public participation landscape as efforts to design more collegial and collaborative public involvement processes compete with more traditional top-down approaches. Public deliberation, a defining concept of deliberative democracy theory, is experiencing a renaissance among both scholars and policymakers. Televised town halls are now commonplace during election campaigns. Citizen dialogues have been used to elicit informed opinion and to probe for shared public values in conjunction with major policy reform initiatives. It would be naïve to think that public participation has become institutionalized within Canadian culture yet high profile examples of impressive citizen engagement efforts exist. British Columbia's Citizens' Assembly and the citizens dialogues held in conjunction with the Commission on the Future of Health Care in Canada and the Government of Ontario's 2004 budget are a notable few. Similarly, while public consultation is not a mandatory feature of Commissions of Inquiry, it has become an implicit requirement (Spicer Commission, 1991; Commission on New Reproductive Technologies; 1993; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996; Gomery Commission, 2005).

The origins of this trend have been discussed widely and include arguments of declining citizen deference to public officials, vociferous calls for greater legitimacy and accountability, and a desire to bring government closer to the people. Efforts are also underway to consider how public participation might become more institutionalized. In this paper we move the discussion in a different direction to examine the question of what impacts these efforts are having or could have on the public policy process to which they are contributing as well as on the political and civic engagement of the participants who are contributing through these efforts.

Whether or not public participation has become an institutional feature of government and public policy decision making, the degree of attention being given to expanding ordinary citizens' roles in the policy process underscores the need to consider what effects these processes might and will have on public policy decisions and on those who participate in them. Democratic theory tells us that public participation is undertaken for different purposes and with different underlying goals. Tensions exist between views of participation as an essential element of successful democracy (and inherently desirable in its own right) and participation as a means for achieving something else, be it a specific decision outcome, a desire for more informed, accountable or legitimate decision making, or perhaps to delay or share the blame for a difficult decision. Lying somewhere between is the desire for public participation to contribute to a more educated and engaged citizenry (Abelson and Eyles, 2002).

But what do we know about the extent to which these goals have been met or whether these are shared by all parties at the outset of the process? And to what extent has the research evidence that has been produced to inform these questions been used by policy

makers and public participation practitioners to design subsequent processes? We address these questions by reviewing the current state of knowledge about the impact of public involvement on public policy and civic literacy in different policy, jurisdictional and cultural contexts. In doing so, we identify the conceptual and methodological approaches being employed and the challenges associated with this area of inquiry. We assess the extent to which this research is being used and is informed by potential users of this research and, lastly, we identify the limits of evaluation and its uptake and discuss strategies for promoting future practice and methods of public participation evaluation.

We have not adopted an explicit definition of public participation or involvement in this review. We wish to be clear at the outset of the paper that, by public, we are referring to ‘ordinary citizens’ rather than to organized groups of individuals or to individuals with special expertise in a policy area. We recognize that ordinary citizens are often part of many organized groups and may have a considerable degree of expertise in a variety of areas that they will bring to their participatory roles. But in our discussions about the public in this paper, it is neither their organizational affiliations nor their expertise that is the basis upon which their involvement is being sought. We also wish to clarify that, given the paper’s focus on the recent public participation literature, we place a greater emphasis on the active, reciprocal and informed public contributions that citizens can make to the policy process through a range of public involvement activities.

1.1 Approach to the Review

The paper is structured around three core elements. The first is a review of theoretical and conceptual literature that: i) presents evaluation research agendas (e.g., Rowe and Frewer, 2004) and frameworks (e.g., Uddin, 2004; Rowe and Frewer, 2001); ii) considers specific methodological issues in public participation evaluation (e.g., Coglianesse, 2004; Rowe and Frewer, 2005; Chess, 2000; Halvorsen, 2001); or covers both of these topics (e.g., OECD, 2005). Both published and grey literatures covering a 5-year period (2000-2005) were included in this part of the review. The second component comprises a review of the published, English and French-language empirical public participation evaluation literature collected over the 2000-2005 period¹. Although not an exclusive focus of our review, we have emphasized studies of public participation methods that incorporate a deliberative component, as this is where much of the new empirical research activity in the public participation arena is found. The third element considers the perspectives of policy makers and public participation sponsors and/or practitioners on the subject of evaluation. For this section, we have drawn on a small amount of published and grey literature and have supplemented this with interviews with policy makers and public participation practitioners working at various levels of government and in quasi-governmental organizations across the country. These interviews inform our questions about actual and potential uses of public participation evaluation in policy practice. A list of the organizational positions of these interviewees is included in Appendix 1.

¹ Comprehensive reviews of the empirical literature preceding this time period have been published elsewhere. See for example, Abelson et al. 2003 and Rowe and Frewer 2004.

1.2 The Question and Purpose of Evaluation

In tackling the questions posed in this paper, we are keenly aware that public participation is a highly context-driven, social and political process (Contandriopoulos, 2004; Tedford-Gold, 2005). The premise that it can be built into the fabric of societies through technocratic means, and that it can be designed, implemented and then evaluated using technical approaches is debatable. Even by posing the evaluative questions as we have in this paper, we are making a claim that is open to challenge, that public participation has purely instrumental features associated with it that can be separated from its socio-political context. While we are sympathetic to this view, we also believe that if substantial resources are going to be invested in the design and implementation of public participation processes, it seems logical to assess the returns that are yielded on these investments.

A compelling argument for evaluating public participation, then, is one of accountability -- to ensure the proper use of public or institutional resources, including citizens' time and effort. But there are other reasons for evaluating public participation. As with any intervention, evaluation provides the opportunity to determine whether the intervention works or to learn from past experiences for the purposes of making future improvements either in the intervention itself or in the way that it is implemented. We refer to the former as *summative* evaluation and to the latter as *formative* evaluation (i.e., assessments of whether or not the intervention implemented achieved its objectives) (Weiss, 1998). There are also ethical or moral reasons for evaluating public participation. Evaluation plays an important role in establishing whether or not a fair process was constructed or whether the views of participants were accurately and fairly represented in a decision process. Lastly, theoretical or scholarly interests in evaluating public participation may be pursued for the purposes of describing, explaining and predicting human behaviour and social processes (Rowe and Frewer, 2004). It is our view, and thus the approach that we have adopted in this review, that the search for a single "best" public participation approach that can be applied to any situation is unlikely to bear fruit but that through rigorous evaluation, it is possible to identify *better* methods than others, methods that are better suited to different situations and perhaps even a "best" method for different but definable contexts, a theme that we will discuss in more detail throughout the paper.

The arguments for undertaking evaluation, as described above, are tightly linked to questions about who will undertake the evaluation and under what circumstances. Evaluation of any kind is fraught with political and practical challenges that can constrain the choice of evaluator, the scope and approach to the evaluation and ultimately, its ability to influence the design of future public involvement processes. These challenges are particularly acute in the field of public participation, where there is often a high level of discomfort about whether or not to involve the public, let alone whether and how to evaluate its impacts.

2 ASSESSING THE CURRENT STATE OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION EVALUATION

Scholars within different fields of study are unanimous in their conclusions about the paucity of good quality research evidence about public participation and its effects.

“Unfortunately, empirical research on deliberative democracy has lagged significantly behind theory.”

(Delli Carpini, Cook and Jacobs, 2004:316)

“There is little systematic research on the nature and consequences of deliberation in real settings...”

(Mendelberg, 2002:152)

“...perhaps most important, is the question of how can we be sure that participation results in any improvement over previous ways of doing things, or indeed, or of any effective or useful consequences at all. ... In addressing this issue, the dearth of high-quality empirical evaluations will be highlighted, along with the lack of any comprehensive framework for conducting such evaluations.”

(Rowe and Frewer, 2004)

Reviews of international public participation activity have also noted this “evaluation gap”:

“... there is a striking imbalance between the amount of time, money and energy that governments in OECD countries invest in engaging citizens and civil society in public decision making and the amount of attention they pay to evaluating the effectiveness and impact of such efforts.”

(OECD, 2005)

This evaluation gap has been explained away as a function of the recent interest in experimentation with new public engagement mechanisms combined with the ‘youth’ of evaluation as a discipline. But public participation is hardly a new social phenomenon and the use of evaluation as an input to program and policy delivery has had a long history within government and academia. Regardless of the precise reasons for the gap, there seems to be widespread agreement about the need for more work to be done before we are in a position to be able to make any conclusive statements about public participation’s impacts on public policy or any other outcome of interest.

2.1 Unpacking the Challenges of Evaluation

“It is useful to differentiate evaluation from assessment, the former referring to the structured process of establishing success ... against preset criteria, the latter referring to the relatively unstructured analysis of an exercise without preset effectiveness criteria, as occurs in the conducting of descriptive case studies.”

(Frewer, 2005: 94)

The first documentation of the challenges in evaluating public participation is generally attributed to Rosener (1981) who identified four key elements: 1) the complexity and value-laden nature of public participation as a concept; 2) the absence of widely held criteria for judging its success and failure; 3) the lack of agreed-upon evaluation methods; and 4) the paucity of reliable measurement tools. These four areas continue to plague the public participation today. Participation remains a complex, value-laden concept with multiple purposes, meanings, levels and methods. Despite numerous typologies and conceptual frameworks dating back to Sherri Arnstein's famous "ladder of participation" in the 1960s, many public participation studies have suffered from a lack of precision about the purpose, features and dimensions of participation. In the last decade, and the last 5 years in particular, governments and affiliated organizations have begun to act on this deficiency by developing and promulgating an abundance of public participation frameworks to guide design and evaluation (e.g., Vancouver Coastal Authority; Calgary Health Region; Winnipeg Regional Health Authority; Health Canada). Participatory approaches are more routinely designated as information, consultation or public participation or as deliberative² vs. non-deliberative or 'traditional' methods. Some progress has also been made toward the development of public participation evaluation frameworks and criteria and a small number of these early evaluation frameworks have been influential in guiding subsequent evaluation studies (Abelson et al., 2003). Their translation into broader 'meta-criteria' that could be used to evaluate a broad range of public participation initiatives is still under development and remains a contested area in the field (Frewer, 2005).

2.2 Tracing the History of Evaluation Framework Developments

One of the first notable evaluation frameworks was Webler's "fairness and competence" framework, heavily influenced by Habermas' concepts of ideal speech and communicative competence (Renn, 1992; Webler, 1995). Its influence has been exerted through the widespread use and adaptation of the fairness and competence principles to numerous evaluation studies (Petts, 2001; Rowe and Frewer, 2000; Pratchett, 1999; Beierle, 1999; Beierle and Cayford, 2000; McIver, 1998; Smith and Wales, 1996; Crosby, 1995). The framework is structured around two overarching criteria against which deliberative participatory processes are to be judged: 1) *fairness* requires the equal distribution of opportunities to act meaningfully in all aspects of the participation process including agenda setting, establishing procedural rules, selecting the information and expertise to inform the process and assessing the validity of claims; and 2) *competence* goal deals more with the content of the process. A competent process ensures that appropriate knowledge and understanding of the issue is achieved through access to information and the interpretation of the information. Competence also requires that appropriate procedures be used to select the knowledge that will be considered in the process (Webler, 1995).

²In this paper, we adopt James Fearon's definition of deliberation which refers either to a particular sort of discussion—one that involves the careful and serious weighing of reasons for and against some proposition—or to an interior process by which an individual weighs reasons for and against courses of action. (Fearon, 1998, p. 63)

The utility of these types of frameworks to practical evaluation can be limited by their abstractness. For example, while comprehensively exploring the theoretical underpinnings of the fairness and competence principles, Webler inadequately addresses the practical but crucial issues of operationalizing and measuring the achievement of these goals. As a result, studies that have attempted to apply this framework have tended to produce vague results.

More recent conceptual contributions have come from the fields of science, technology and environmental policy, each with long histories of public participation (Rowe and Frewer, 2000 and 2004; Beierle and Cayford, 2002; Petts, 2001). For example, Beierle and Cayford (2002) identify five broad social goals for public participation against which *successful participation* is to be assessed: 1) the incorporation of public values into decisions; 2) improvement of the substantive quality of decisions; 3) resolution of conflict among competing interests; 4) building trust in institutions; and 5) educating and informing the public. These criteria, while retaining an emphasis on the procedural features of public participation make an important new contribution in their articulation of outcome criteria (i.e., impacts of the process on decision making and on participants) which have been used to assess 239 cases of public involvement spanning 30 years of environmental decision-making in the United States (Beierle and Cayford, 2002).

The most recent and prolific contributors to the public participation evaluation field, generally, and to the development of evaluation frameworks, specifically, have been Gene Rowe (UK Institute of Food Research) and Lynn Frewer (University of Wageningen, The Netherlands). Included among their contributions are the development and application of a public participation typology and evaluation framework as well as a proposed public participation evaluation research agenda. We discuss their work in greater detail throughout the paper.

2.3 From Frameworks to Criteria: Operationalizing Evaluation

2.3.1 Defining 'successful' participation: According to whom and how?

Missing from both Webler's and Beierle's work is explicit recognition of the different evaluation perspectives that may exist among interested parties. For example, sponsors and taxpayers tend to be interested in value for money. But sponsors and organizers of public participation should also be interested in questions of efficacy and effectiveness (if the purpose is summative evaluation) and whether the public participation method implemented was successful as measured against its goals (to address a formative evaluation purpose). Participants themselves are increasingly interested in whether their involvement makes a difference (i.e., policy impact) and, as taxpayers, they also want to see that their involvement was meaningful given that investments in public participation are typically made at the expense of direct service and program delivery. These differing perspectives are integrally linked to the different underlying goals for public participation.

The concept of what is a good, successful or effective public participation process depends both on whose perspective is being considered and what that perspective entails.

Participants and public participation organizers may not agree on what constitutes a “good” process if they have different underlying goals and expectations for that process. For example, in their study of public perspectives on what constitutes a good public participation process, Webler, Tuler and Krueger (2001) identified 5 different perspectives, some of which were associated with the outcome of the process (e.g., acquires and maintains popular legitimacy) and others that emphasized features of the process (e.g., facilitates ideological discussion; fairness).

To further complicate matters, there has been little emphasis given to prioritizing or differentiating between different elements of success. In a survey of Canadian health system decision makers who were asked to identify the defining features of “successful public involvement”, over three-quarters of respondents rated 6 out of the 8 potentially defining features of “successful public involvement” as either “very important” or “extremely important” (Abelson et al., 2004). If everything is important and contributes to success, identifying the defining elements of a ‘successful’ process becomes a much more challenging task.

This raises the crucial but unexplored question of how evaluation criteria or ‘elements of success’ should be weighted in evaluation, by whom, and whether some criteria are more important than others in terms of their contribution to the evaluation. To date, judgments about the relative emphasis that is given to representativeness vs. quality of dialogue, for example, or to impacts on lay knowledge vs. cost effectiveness, have been made arbitrarily. Evaluation researchers have tended to focus on specific elements such as process or outcome or, even more specifically, on aspects of each (e.g., quality of deliberation, inclusivity of the process, effects on decision making, knowledge acquisition or citizen capacity). While each of these, on their own, are helpful contributions, this piecemeal approach fails to address the reality that decision makers face in determining the relative importance to assign to each of these elements in the evaluation of a particular public participation process.

2.3.2 *Defining and measuring effectiveness*

While recognizing that relevant stakeholders’ definitions of “success” need to be accounted for more carefully, it is clear that “further comparative analysis of current practice is needed to improve government’s understanding of what constitutes success and how to achieve it” (OECD, 2005:17). Rowe and Frewer (2000 and 2004) have moved the furthest toward achieving this goal in developing a public participation evaluation research agenda (Rowe and Frewer, 2004). A major emphasis of their agenda is the defining of effective public participation for the purposes of establishing which mechanism works best in which situation and why.

“Unless there is a clear definition of what it means for a participation exercise to be effective, there will be no theoretical benchmark against which performance may be assessed.” (Rowe and Frewer, 2004:517)

But, as they go on to point out, finding common definitions of effectiveness presents considerable challenges:

“... effectiveness in this domain is not an obvious, unidimensional and objective quality that can be easily identified, described and then measured.” (Rowe and Frewer, 2004:517)

In their review of 30 public participation evaluation studies published between 1981 and 2004 which explicitly defined effectiveness, all but two defined effectiveness according to some form of outcome criteria while about half defined effectiveness using a combination of process and outcome criteria. Tremendous variability was found in the terminology used to describe process or outcome effectiveness and explicit definitions of these measures were rare. Tables 1 and 2 illustrate the range of criteria used in these studies. Effectiveness definitions were also depicted as either *universal* (i.e., applying to public participation as a whole) or *local* (i.e., applying to some subset of participation mechanisms or contexts) with an even number of each across the studies reviewed. Lack of explicit statements about the criteria themselves or their generalizability is a major limitation of these studies and an area that could be improved upon in future evaluation studies (Rowe and Frewer, 2004). We revisit this theme later on in the paper.

TABLE 1
Process Evaluation Criteria used in Public Participation Evaluation Studies
(Source: Rowe and Frewer, 2004)

PROCESS CRITERIA	
♦ Representativeness	♦ Task definition
♦ Inclusivity	♦ Independence
♦ Participation rate	♦ Interaction
♦ Early involvement / Obtaining input early in planning process/Continuous involvement	♦ Continuity
♦ Process fairness	♦ Comfort
♦ Process flexibility	♦ Convenience
♦ Subjective assessment of previous evaluator	♦ Satisfaction
♦ Perceived openness of process	♦ Deliberation
♦ Transparency	♦ Fairness
♦ Structured decision making	♦ Competence
♦ Resource accessibility	♦ Identification of common good
	♦ Incorporation of values/beliefs into discussion
	♦ Effectiveness of method process

TABLE 2

**Outcome Evaluation Criteria used in
Public Participation Evaluation Studies
(Source: Rowe and Frewer, 2004)**

OUTCOME CRITERIA	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Policy/Decision Influence ◆ Time to develop regulations ◆ Reduce/eliminate judicial challenges ◆ Agency responsiveness to participants' policy demands ◆ Public views incorporated into decision-making ◆ Influence on public ◆ Social impact ◆ Impact on general thinking ◆ Effect on public and plan support ◆ Participants' values/opinions changed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Interaction with lay knowledge (impact on lay learning) ◆ Effect on staff and planning process ◆ Impact on training (learning of knowledgeable personnel) ◆ Staff awareness ◆ Conflict resolution ◆ Restoring public trust in public agencies ◆ Perceptions of consultation by MPs, public, media (i.e., perceived success/failure) ◆ Effectiveness and cost effectiveness ◆ Procedural impact of the mechanism

2.3.3 Reaching Consensus about Effectiveness Criteria

While the goal of finding agreement on a consistent set of effectiveness criteria has been elusive so far, there are indications that common ground may be close at hand. For example, there is consistency between many of the evaluation criteria presented in both early and more recent theoretical frameworks, and those identified by public participation practitioners and the public. Interviews with health system decision makers, in Ontario and Quebec, for example, yielded at least four broad criteria against which a successful public participation process should be judged: representativeness; the design of open, inclusive and engaging processes; ensuring access to information in a way that promotes improved understanding and knowledge among participants; and the legitimacy of the process (Abelson, Forest, Eyles et al., 2002).

Similarly, the views of citizen participants collected from focus groups appear to map closely onto most of the prior principles of public involvement evaluation that have been identified in prior syntheses with a few modifications (Table 3). Participants give greater emphasis to the content and balance of information for the purposes of building trust and credibility between citizens and decision-makers. Participants also viewed themselves, as well as decision-makers, as sources of information to be shared through the consultation process. Finally, participants stressed the importance of getting the information and communication principles right over addressing all other principles (Abelson, Forest, Eyles et al., 2004).

TABLE 3
Comparison of public consultation design principles with
Citizens' views about public involvement

Public consultation design principles (from previous synthesis work)	Citizens' views about public involvement (from focus groups results)
<p><i>Clearly communicate:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the purpose of the consultation • its procedural rules • the relationship between the consultation and the decisions taken <p><i>Represent views, interests and constituencies:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • by carefully considering whose input should be considered • by providing opportunities for all participants to contribute fairly <p><i>Develop procedural rules:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • that promote power-sharing and mutual respect among participants and between participants and decision-makers • that allow for adequate time for questions, clarification, listening and understanding • that promote trust, credibility and legitimacy <p><i>Provide information:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • that is accessible (e.g. understandable, appropriate amount) • presented in a way that informs discussion • that can be discussed and interpreted • from credible and trusted sources 	<p><i>Communication</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • clear communication about the purpose of the consultation, and its relationship to the larger decision-making process • identifiable links between the consultation and the decision outcome (through the presence of someone in a decision-making role) <p><i>People</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • careful recruitment of the appropriate mix of people for the issue being discussed <p><i>Process</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • promote power-sharing and mutual respect among participants and between participants and decision-makers through neutral, impartial facilitation • use a flexible structure to allow for meaningful contributions <p><i>Information exchange</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • information sharing in a context of trust • information to be presented clearly, honestly and with integrity (by neutral facilitators) • needs to ensure participants' comfort with the topic and to build the confidence for meaningful participation • lay views and experiential expertise should be listened to and considered

Source: Abelson J, Forest P-G, Eyles J, Casebeer A and Mackean G. and the Effective Public Consultation Project Team. 'Will it make a difference if I show up and share?' A citizens' perspective on improving public involvement processes for health system decision-making. *Journal of Health Services Research and Policy*, 2004;9(4):205-212.

Progress toward the development of a valid, reliable and usable evaluation toolkit is also underway. Rowe and Frewer (2000) identified 9 evaluation criteria that were used to develop an evaluation toolkit that evaluation sponsors can use to determine whether their

evaluations were successful when assessed against these criteria. The toolkit includes a short 9-item questionnaire and a longer 58-item questionnaire both of which are to be used by participants. In addition, an evaluation checklist was developed for use by the evaluator to produce a more objective assessment according to multiple perspectives. The reliability, validity and usability of this toolkit have been tested in several UK public participation exercises with promising outcomes. The toolkit performed well in most areas; it was sensitive to different types of public participation mechanisms; it was able to assess electronic public participation; it enabled systematic comparison of different public participation processes across different time points. One area of weakness revealed, however, was in its ability to assess the influence of the public participation exercise given the lack of any “objective” means for assessing influence (e.g., post-hoc assessments of impact) (Frewer, 2005).

To put the themes discussed in this section into context, it is clear that there has been *some* progress made toward improving the rigour with which public participation evaluation is undertaken, chiefly through the development of more explicit and agreed-upon evaluation criteria that have both process and outcome evaluation properties. What is also evident is that the bulk of this progress has been focused on improving what are still largely formative evaluation studies, that is, efforts to improve on existing practice and to assess a public participation process against an a priori set of objectives for what constitutes successful public participation.

3 A PLURALITY OF EVALUATION APPROACHES AND METHODS

“The definition of program evaluation is sufficiently ambiguous that a key text (Patton, 1982) lists 33 different models of evaluation and concludes that it is not practical to adopt a single definition of evaluation.”

(Chess, 2000:770)

3.1 Evaluation Approaches

The public participation evaluation literature exemplifies the multi-faceted nature of the evaluation field. Approaches taken to evaluating public participation differ conceptually and methodologically in response to different disciplinary and purpose-driven perspectives. Chess (2000) identifies 3 approaches to public participation evaluation that are routinely undertaken: 1) *user-based* evaluation, which assumes that different participants will have different goals and that the evaluation must take these different goals into account; 2) *theory-based* evaluation which is driven by theories and models of public participation and applies normative criteria universally to any public participation effort; and 3) *goal-free* evaluation which is not constrained by any stated goals and is conducted in the absence of any theory.

Much of the evaluation work that has been discussed so far (e.g., the work of Rowe and Frewer, Beierle and others) falls into the user-based evaluation category. However, good descriptive models of the phenomena to be studied can be “important tools that can be used to structure an inquiry” (Forss, 2005: 58) and hypotheses of expected results help focus the evaluation and guide the selection of methods. A growing body of theory-based evaluation is contributing to our knowledge of the impacts of deliberative participation. For example, deliberative democratic theory is a source for numerous testable hypotheses regarding the effects of deliberative participation on policy and its participants. Similarly, small group deliberation theory with its social psychology roots has generated testable hypotheses that have been used to evaluate simulated deliberative participation experiences that might also be used to inform studies of ‘live’ deliberation.

Another distinguishing feature of public participation evaluations is their emphasis on either *process* or *outcome* evaluation. **Process evaluations** focus on the study of what goes on while a program is in progress and relate to the phase of the program being studied, i.e., program implementation (Weiss, 1998:335). **Outcome evaluations** assess whether or not the program has produced the intended program effects and thus relate to the end result of the program.” (Weiss, 1998:334). Clearly, outcome evaluation is a desirable form of evaluation for policy makers interested in answering the question of whether public participation has produced its intended program effects such as influence on public policy or improved participant learning. But the ability to design and successfully carry out outcome evaluations that will produce useful results is limited in several ways. First, the task of defining the end-point (or “distal outcomes”) of a participation exercise for the purposes of measuring effectiveness is often unclear. Should

it be at the stage of completion of the public participation process, when the output of the public participation is received by the sponsors, or when the recommendations have been tabled and there has been discussion of the recommendations by decision makers? Tracking internal processes within government organizations can be difficult at the best of times but trying to identify how and when influence occurs is even more challenging. Similarly, what is an appropriate timeframe within which we would expect a public participation process to affect participants' knowledge, awareness of the issue and capacity for future engagement? Sorting through the differences between proximal (i.e., those following directly from the instigating program activities) and distal (i.e., those further down the chain) outcomes can be problematic (Rossi et al., 1999:102). Moreover, the ability to measure the institutional and societal impacts of the process which can take many years and may be difficult to disentangle from other events that are influential to the policy process may be limited.

“... impact evaluation focuses on long-term results of programmes and has the potential to inform major policy decisions and track social learning. Such an evaluation is more difficult to conduct because of its cost, a need for commitment over an extended period of time and problems showing that results are caused by a single programme or activity, as opposed to many other variables.” (Chess, 2000:773).

The challenges highlighted above are not unique to public participation evaluation studies, but when combined with the many other practical and political challenges of undertaking public participation, they pose considerable obstacles and may give rise to methodological compromises that can produce misleading results. For example, process evaluations are often used as surrogates for outcome evaluations with the justification that if the process is found to be effective by whatever criteria it is judged against, then the outcome is likely to be 'better' than one that was informed by a bad process. Tracing this logic further, decision makers would be expected to ignore recommendations arising from a poorly-run public participation process. Setting aside the absence of any empirical evidence to support this claim, there are some weaknesses in this argument. First, there are no assurances that a decision maker is going to accept the outcome (i.e., the recommendations) of a process simply because it is perceived to be legitimate. Indeed, decision makers might challenge the legitimacy of the process to suit their interests.

Second, the public participation process may be very well run according to some criteria (e.g., representativeness) but not others (e.g., communication of procedural rules). How are these different levels of quality reconciled and by whom? Lastly and most fundamentally, how do we determine how much credence to give to an apparently acceptable, democratically-driven recommendation? In other words, do good processes necessarily produce 'good' recommendations? This takes us back to our earlier discussion about how 'good' is defined and by whom. And what emphasis should be given to recommendations arising from 'good' vs. 'bad' processes? While most public participation practitioners would confirm that the process of involving the public is not designed to produce right or wrong answers, at some point someone in a position of influence will make a decision about whether or not to incorporate the public's input into

the public policy process, regardless of whether or not the process was deemed to be ‘good’ or ‘bad’. For these reasons, we urge caution in using process evaluations as a surrogate for outcome evaluation.

3.1.1 Designing the Evaluation: Issues in the use of Experimental Methods

The core feature of experimental research methods is the use of a control group, which allows for the isolation of the effects of a program, service or treatment based on the comparison of outcomes for populations that have been exposed to it versus those that have had no exposure. Public participation has rarely, if ever, been implemented under these conditions. In general, the use of experimental methods has not been part of the research design tool box of public participation researchers, although it is more commonly used in social psychology studies of the effects of small group deliberation. As Uddin (2002) states:

“The absence of a control group is problematic since it is not possible to know whether no public involvement would have led to the same outcome”.
(Uddin, 2002: 4)

How appropriate are experimental methods for this type of research? Clearly, there are situations that arise that require policy makers to decide whether or not to undertake public participation. Experimental research methods could be used to inform these types of decisions. But what would this type of research yield? An experimental study might determine that the decision made in a community where public consultation was held was more acceptable to participants than the decision that was made in the control-group community. But this result would be plagued by questions about the comparability of these communities, their expectations and other perceptions toward decision makers and public participation more generally. As discussed earlier, the highly context-dependent nature of public participation would, in most cases, argue against this approach. More often, the prickly decision to be made is which approach to use. This is where a comparison of different methods used for the same type of issue or the comparison of the method’s performance under different contextual situations would be of greater value. These types of studies fall into the category of quasi-experimental designs which are more feasible to carry out and appear to be on the increase in the public participation literature, particularly among political science studies (Cook and Jacobs, 1998).

3.2 Measurement Problems

Moving to the last of the challenges cited by Rosener over two decades ago, measurement is probably the least developed area of the evaluation literature. As discussed earlier, defining and measuring success must be undertaken from a variety of perspectives to ensure that the perspectives of participants, the general public, sponsors and policy makers are considered. However, *participant satisfaction* is routinely used as a measure of success despite the problems associated with its interpretation. Coglianese (2002) cautions evaluators to be wary of using participant satisfaction or similar measures based on participants’ attitudes and opinions, in public participation evaluations. Although often considered an indicator or proxy for the quality of a policy, satisfaction

does not necessarily equate with good public policy. Moreover, participant satisfaction is an incomplete measure because it excludes those who do not participate. Participant satisfaction measures are highly contextual, associated with expectations and should be used in conjunction with the views of the general public

“Asking participants to assess what was accomplished in a policy process is an imperfect measure of what was really accomplished. Such survey results are, at best, evidence of participants’ perceptions, not evidence of the underlying qualities of the public policy. Participants’ perceptions often do not match reality.” (Coglianese, 2002:19)

The issue of measuring *perceived vs. actual impacts* is problematic in any evaluation. In public participation evaluation it can be especially misleading because there may be long timeframes over which perceived impact is being measured which can introduce recall problems. To illustrate this, in a comparative study of deliberative public consultations carried out in 5 Canadian health regions, citizen participants were asked to assess the follow-up activities associated with the public consultation meeting they attended. In one study region, several participants reported that they had received a follow up letter from the sponsoring organization indicating how their input had been used although no letter specifying this information had been sent (Abelson et al., 2004).

The *absence of properly tested measurement tools* is another area in need of attention. In their review of public participation evaluation studies, Rowe and Frewer (2004) identified few examples of well-described instruments or instrument development processes. Moreover, few instruments had been validated or tested for reliability. While progress in the development and testing of measurement tools is clearly a future priority, the *usability* of these tools must also be considered and balanced against the goals of validity, reliability and practicality.

“It’s one thing to develop measurement tools that are valid and reliable... but they also have to be easy to use.” (Rowe and Frewer, 2004)

4 A CONCEPTUAL MAP OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION EVALUATION

In this section we present a conceptual map (Figure 1), which visually depicts the different types and approaches to evaluation, guides our review of the existing research evidence about public participation and its impacts, and highlights gaps that might be addressed in future research. While our primary interest in this paper is the evaluation of public participation's impacts, our review of the literature reveals a complex set of relationships and influences. For example, a small number of studies have examined the direct impacts of participation on policy outcomes by tracing the link between recommendations arising from the participation process to specific policy outcomes. But a more comprehensive assessment of these impacts involves the study of the interplay between the participatory process' influence on participants' knowledge and opinions; the degree of "political talk" that results from the participatory experience and any subsequent civic or political activity that may follow. At any one of these stages there is potential for policy influence, but few studies have been able to discretely isolate the magnitude or direction of these relationships.

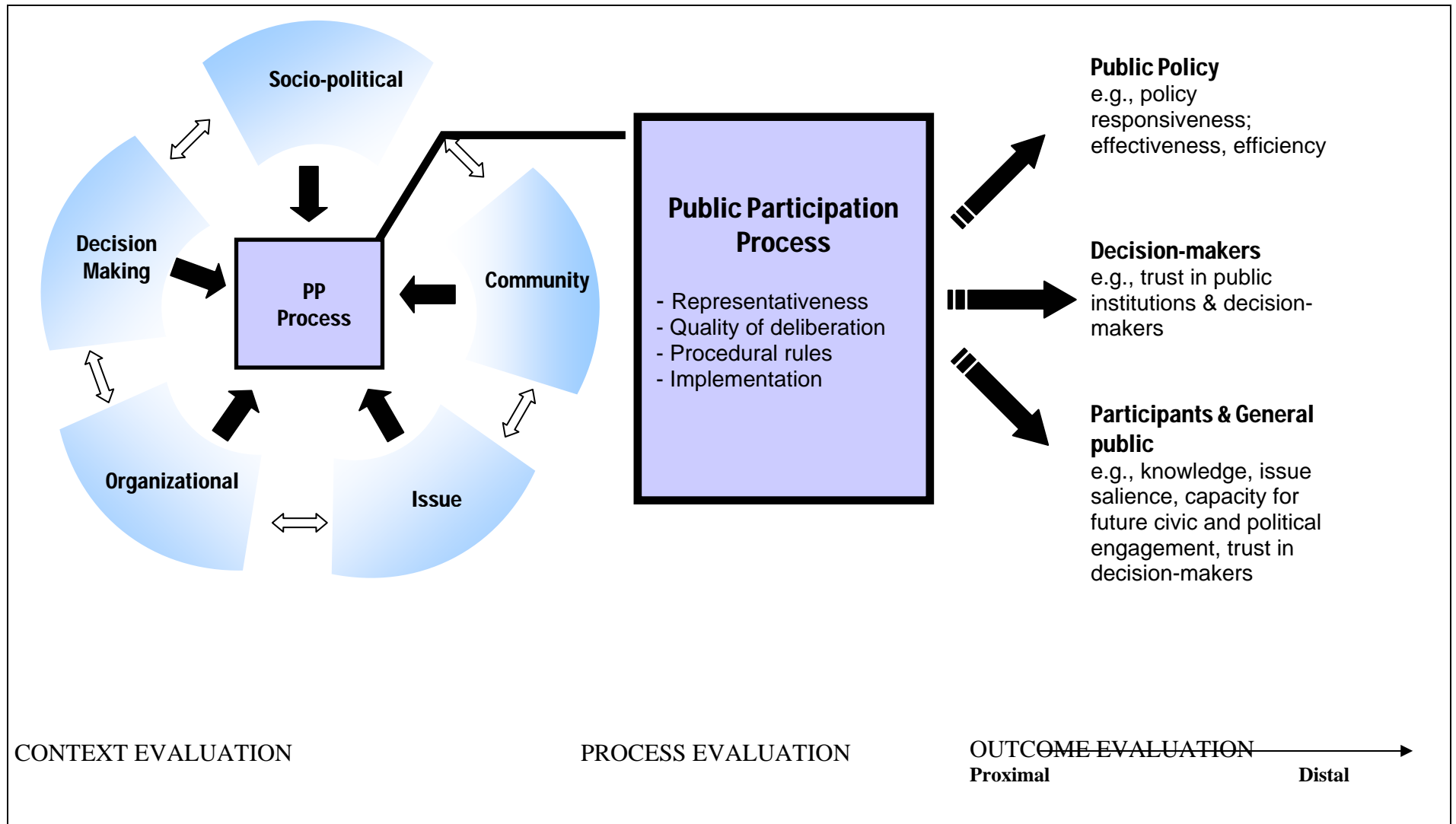
Moving from left to right through Figure 1, we depict three broad groupings of evaluations: context, process and outcome evaluation. The concepts of process and outcome evaluation have been discussed at length in the paper and are well documented in the evaluation literature. But, as discussed earlier, there are diverse contexts within which public participation may be implemented and these contexts can exert considerable shaping effects on the outcomes of the process and on its participants. Context evaluation does not currently feature prominently in the public participation evaluation literature but we believe it is a promising area for future research and could become a more formalized and discrete 'first stage' of evaluation. We discuss this in more detail in the final section of the paper.

Moving into the middle of the figure, a large body of evaluation literature has focused exclusively on the study of public participation processes (i.e., process evaluations) without assessing any participant or policy effects. It is important, however, to distinguish these types of process evaluations from other outcome evaluation studies that are concerned with assessing the impact of a particular public participation process or feature on some process-related variable such as the quality of deliberation or the adherence to a set of ideal-type procedural rules. For the purposes of our review, all intervention studies (i.e., studies designed to test the impact of an intervention on some pre-determined variable) have been categorized as outcome evaluations.

In the far right column of the figure, we have depicted three sets of outcome variables: 1) decisions or policies; 2) decision makers and 3) participants. While the first and third are routinely considered core outcomes of interest, decision makers are perhaps the most crucial but most often overlooked intermediate outcome of interest. As policy makers or sponsors who initiate and oversee a public participation process, the impacts of a public participation process on these individuals can, in turn, exert profound effects on both policy (e.g., will it be used to influence policy) and participants (e.g., how will

participants be informed of the decision and how their input was considered?). As we discuss later in the paper, we are at an early stage in our understanding of these individuals' perspectives on public participation design and evaluation and further research on this critical component of the public participation equation is needed.

FIGURE 1: A Conceptual Map of Public Participation Evaluation



5 REVIEWING THE RESEARCH EVIDENCE

5.1 Characteristics of the Empirical Evaluation Literature

Our review of the empirical evaluation literature reveals a range of disciplines, fields of study and methods used to evaluate public participation. Research design approaches range from case studies to experimental research and employ quantitative survey-based methods as well as qualitative methods of participant observation and in-depth interviews. Political science has contributed substantially to research in this area, primarily through studies of public deliberation and its effects on political decision making. The number of studies of this kind has increased in recent years in response to renewed interest in deliberative democratic participation.

The field of environmental policy and related sub-fields of waste and resource management have also been a consistent source of research activity stemming from the historic role that public participation has played in these types of public policy decisions. Social scientists working in the fields of science and technology policy and science communication have been productive researchers in the public participation arena, as have public administration scholars, particularly those working in local government studies. Much more recent contributors to the empirical public participation evaluation literature are a broadly defined group of health researchers, including health economists, bioethicists and health policy analysts, who have been drawn to the field through efforts to incorporate public involvement into priority setting and resource allocation decision-making processes. In addition to the contributions from the academic community, public participation practitioners are uniquely positioned to offer up lessons from their first-hand experiences with public participation. This body of work has been responsible for the creation of a large and steadily expanding grey literature on public participation. While this literature provides a rich body of practice-based learning resources, it is largely comprised of descriptive assessments of public participation experiences rather than rigorous evaluation. As such, our review of empirical work focuses exclusively on the published literature.

5.2 Distilling the Reviews of Public Participation Impacts

Several review articles have been published recently that summarize the current state of knowledge about public participation impacts. We briefly describe and discuss each of them as well as other selected studies that have been published since then, with a focus on distilling their key contributions to the literature. Using our conceptual map of public participation evaluation (Figure 1) as a guide for our review, in terms of *process*-oriented research, there is a strong message in the literature that “process matters” and that different types of public participation processes should be designed for different types of issues, decision-making conditions and groups of participants. What is much less clear is which of these contextual variables matter most and which processes are better suited to each of these different sets of arrangements.

The bulk of the *outcome*-oriented empirical research that has been produced has focused on assessing the impacts of public participation processes (and public deliberation processes in particular) on a range of citizen participant attributes. These studies have consistently documented:

- increased levels of interest in and knowledge of public issues;
- improved capacity for future public involvement;
- increased propensity for social bond formation and;
- improved trust of fellow citizens.

Evidence from experimental research has also produced compelling results about the public opinion changes that result from public deliberation process. In contrast, there has been much less produced about the direct impacts of public participation on the policy process and political decision making and what has been produced offers mixed and ambiguous results (e.g., public deliberation can produce outcomes that influence policy but the conditions under which this occurs are not easily identifiable). As we discuss later on, research that has examined the effects of public participation on decision makers and policy makers has been almost non-existent.

In 2004, Delli Carpini, Cook and Jacobs published a review article in the *Annual Review of Political Science* which reviewed the empirical research bearing on the theoretical expectations of public deliberation and its contributions to citizen engagement. The focus of this review was on the role of a particular public participation *process* (i.e., public deliberation) on citizen participant and general public *outcomes* primarily, and on political decision making *outcomes* secondarily. The review takes a *theory-based* approach to evaluation in its assessment of the following theorized benefits of public deliberation:

- citizens become more engaged and active in civic affairs
- citizen tolerance for opposing viewpoints increases
- citizens' understanding and ability to justify their preferences improves
- faith in the democratic process is enhanced
- political decisions will be more considered and informed
- community social capital will increase through deliberative experiences
- legitimacy of government will increase as people have a say in and better understand its workings
- more sound individual and collective decisions will result
- support for responsive public officials will grow

The overarching question guiding their review was “What is the impact of discursive participation and public deliberation on civic engagement?” While emphasizing the ‘thinness’ of the empirical research that directly tests these relationships, the authors reach a number of tentative conclusions through their extensive review of: i) descriptive studies of the prevalence of public deliberation; ii) social psychology research on small group deliberation; iii) case study and survey-based research on the political consequences of deliberation; and iv) experimental research on political deliberation processes and their impacts on citizen participants and decision outcomes. We have

provided a fuller discussion of the range of their conclusions but a major conclusion of their review is that:

... the impact of deliberation ... is highly context dependent. It varies with the purpose of deliberation, the subject under discussion, who participates, the connection to authoritative decision makers, the rules governing interactions, the information provided, prior beliefs, substantive outcomes, and real-world conditions. As a result, although the research summarized in this essay demonstrates numerous positive benefits of deliberation, deliberation under less optimal circumstances can be ineffective at best and counterproductive at worst.
(Delli Carpini, Cook and Jacobs, 2004: 336)

5.2.1 Summary of conclusions (from Delli Carpini, Cook and Jacobs, 2004)

1. *'Public talk' is prevalent enough (among Americans) to warrant a deeper understanding of its role in democratic politics.*

This conclusion is informed by a series of survey-based studies that suggest that talking about public issues is widespread among the American public and is associated with higher socioeconomic and education levels. This research has focused predominantly on determining the prevalence or quantity of public talk and reveals little about its quality or any benefits that it produces (Delli Carpini, Cook and Jacobs, 2004:324).

2. *There is substantial evidence (although it is partial and inconsistent) that deliberation can lead to some of the individual and collective benefits theorized but that these benefits are "highly context dependent and rife with opportunities for going awry" (Delli Carpini, Cook and Jacobs, 2004: 328).*

The authors reach this conclusion largely based on a review of social psychology research on small group deliberations published by Mendelberg (2002).

3. *Similar findings (to those stated above) emerge from research explicitly designed to test the democratic, political uses of deliberation.*

The authors reviewed the plethora of case study and survey-based research studies on political deliberation and summarize the main findings as follows.

From the work of Jane Mansbridge (1983) who carried out direct observations of deliberation in combination with in-depth interviews with participants:

- deliberation can (and should) take different forms depending on both the nature of the issue under discussion and the makeup of the group;
- processes where consensus is sought are most effective when participants share underlying common interests and social bonds and when there is an identifiable solution;

- majority rule processes are preferred when underlying interests differ, when participants are less closely tied and when the problem lacks an easily identifiable solution;
- citizen satisfaction depends heavily on choosing the correct model for the issue and groups involved.

From the work of Jon Gastil (2000) who carried out a number of case studies of ‘real-world’ deliberative initiatives including qualitative research on the Kettering Foundation’s National Issues Forums:

- long-term deliberative processes can produce priorities and solutions that are acted upon by local policy makers;
 - deliberation develops coherent collective interests and strong bonds among citizens;
 - deliberation can change political opinion, increase self-efficacy and sense of community identity, widen and diversify participants’ political communication networks, make participants more “deliberative” in their political conversations, raise interest in politics, increase frequency of political information seeking and political activity.

Quantitative analyses of the impact of real-world deliberative forums provide “encouraging, if inconclusive and sometimes mixed evidence” of positive impacts on participants. Delli Carpini (1997) reports the following:

- citizens who participate in deliberative discussions become more knowledgeable about the issue, more trusting of fellow participants and more likely to report participating in other forms of civic engagement;
- citizen participants “overwhelmingly agreed that the recommendations summarized in the project’s final report accurately reflected the consensus of the group, even if they did not reflect their own personal view.”

A study using one of the most rigorous designs employed in a public participation evaluation study (i.e., a quasi-experimental pre-test/post-test comparison group design) (Cook and Jacobs, 1998) found that participation in a deliberative forum had the following impacts:

- increased levels of interest in, knowledge about and plans for political involvement about deliberation issue (though not actual participation) among those who attended deliberation forum.

Other studies of real-world deliberative initiatives have produced more negative findings about deliberation’s impacts. For example, Berry’s (1993) study of efforts to increase citizen involvement in policy decisions in 5 US cities revealed a failure to increase participation rates. Other studies have reported intense feelings of dissatisfaction and frustration among participants in these types of processes (Mendelberg and Oleske, 2000). Lastly, citizens who believe they have the ability to influence government have been found to hold less favourable attitudes toward that institution (Tyler 1994; Tyler and

Mitchell, 1994). These findings suggest that the impact of deliberation is complex and context dependent and does not assure either citizen satisfaction or government responsiveness.

4. *The experimental research on political deliberation offers some of the most rigorous efforts to assess public participation impacts yet “paints an equally if not more complex picture” (Delli Carpini, Cook and Jacobs, 2004:332).*

Deliberative polling studies have produced the following results. From Fishkin (1999); Fishkin and Luskin, (1999a,b,c); Luskin and Fishkin (1998); Luskin et al. (1999a,b, 2000,2002), participation in deliberative processes is found to:

- facilitate political learning;
- promote interpretable individual and collective opinion change on the policy issues discussed;
- increase political efficacy which has the potential to indirectly strengthen other aspects of citizenship that are positively related to efficacy, such as political interest and civic and political participation.

(Delli Carpini, Cook and Jacobs, 2004:334)

Despite these positive findings, critiques of the deliberative method and its impacts have been widespread and most often focus on concern about the generalizability of findings given potential biases introduced by voluntary participants (i.e., those who agree to attend the forum); the idiosyncracies of the deliberative experience; the stability/durability of the attitudes, opinions and knowledge following deliberations and the practicality of the design for broad-based public consultation.

Since the publication of this review there have been several other contributions to the deliberation literature. Goodin and Niemeyer (2003) analyzed the deliberations of an Australian citizen’s jury formed to provide input on an environmental issue. Their analysis of jurors’ deliberations revealed a greater change in juror attitudes in response to the ‘information’ phase of the jury proceedings, involving a large degree of ‘deliberation within’, than during the formal ‘discussion’ phase. Results such as these suggest that there may be various ways of evoking internal reflection of this kind, even in mass political settings. These might include adult or school-based civic and/or citizenship programs that are built upon a strong foundation of information.

Grogan and Gusmano (2005) contribute a similarly mixed review of deliberation’s impacts. In their case study evaluations of Connecticut’s Medicaid Managed Care council deliberations, these deliberations were found to generate new solutions to program policy problems but they tended to be of a more incremental and technical nature. Participants’ focus on the instrumental purpose of deliberation (i.e., to produce solutions to policy problems) discouraged the sharing of non-mainstream views leading the authors to conclude that deliberation should be implemented in multiple stages to allow for more open, fuller deliberation.

A second review article retrieved, published by Rowe and Frewer (2004), has already been discussed in section 2. In contrast to the political science orientation of the Delli Carpini, Cook and Jacobs (2004) review, Rowe and Frewer draw on evaluation research from a broad spectrum of policy areas and fields of study (rather than specific disciplines) with the goal of developing an evaluation research agenda. As such, their objective was not to summarize the research findings per se but to use their review of 30 public participation evaluation studies published between 1981 and 2004 to assess their quality with respect to defining and measuring the effectiveness of the public participation process that was implemented. Most of the 30 studies reviewed, half of which were designed to evaluate outcomes and half of which set out to evaluate both process and outcomes, were assessed by the authors to be of generally poor methodological quality (e.g., no a priori definition of effectiveness; absence of a clear articulation of the public participation mechanism being evaluated; absence of validated instruments, etc.). We have not summarized the findings here (click on www.cprn.org for the complete paper).

Another notable contribution to the public participation evaluation review literature is Beierle and Cayford's review and meta analysis of 239 cases of public involvement spanning 30 years of environmental decision-making in the United States. The authors' principal conclusion -- that 'process matters' -- is based on the strong association found between broad acceptance of the decision outcomes (one of their measures of success) and 'processes in which agencies are responsive, participants are motivated, the quality of deliberation is high, and participants have at least a moderate degree of control over the process' (Beierle and Cayford, 2002). The authors also flag the context dependency of public participation as a challenge for evaluation and identify 3 types of contexts worthy of exploration: i) issue type; ii) levels of pre-existing conflict and mistrust; and iii) differences across local, state and national decision-making processes or agencies. A main conclusion of their review, however, is that "good processes appear to overcome some of the most challenging and conflicted contexts" (Beierle and Cayford, 2002: 74).

6 PRACTITIONER PERSPECTIVES

As discussed earlier, public participation practitioners are recognizing the importance of careful thought about participation goals, design and evaluation. This has been reflected in the articulation of several public participation frameworks produced within regionalized health systems (e.g., Vancouver Island Health Authority, 2003; Winnipeg Regional Health Authority, 2004; Calgary Health Region, 2002) and by various government agencies (e.g., Health Canada's Corporate Consultation Secretariat; the Ontario Government's Democratic Renewal Secretariat). This work is in its infancy though and only a small number of organizations have formalized their approaches to public participation design and evaluation in this way.

To supplement our literature review with a 'real world' orientation, we sought the perspectives of public participation practitioners working at various government levels across Canada. We drew on two sources for these perspectives: 1) prior studies that have attempted to learn about decision makers' experiences with public participation; and 2) a small set of key informant interviews (n=6) held with a range of decision makers and managers working at different levels of government in different policy sectors who have some responsibility for public participation within their mandates.

6.1 Perspectives from Prior Studies

In 1999-2000, approximately 50 board members and senior executives of regional health and social services boards in Quebec (RHSSBs) and district health councils in Ontario (DHCs) were interviewed to learn about their organizations' aggregate experience with the design, implementation and evaluation of public participation processes³. For most of these decision makers "the task of designing a consultation was described as an informal process, with little reliance on research evidence or formal evaluation of previous consultation processes" (Abelson et al., 2002: 82). However, many decision makers spoke of the need for more 'focused' and 'better structured' processes that are more tightly connected to clearly stated objectives. They also emphasized the need for more evaluation of current methods and processes. But only a handful of interviewees described "any explicit efforts to evaluate their public participation activities and none of these were based on any pre-determined criteria against which the process could be evaluated" (Abelson et al., 2002). What appears to have been a major shift in public participation thinking and practice toward the end of the 1990s has gone largely unnoticed and unmonitored with respect to assessing the impacts of this practice change on participants or policy decisions.⁴

³ At the time of these interviewees, both of these organizations had explicit mandates to undertake public participation as part of their planning and management roles.

⁴ It should also be noted that in 2005 the District Health Councils in Ontario were abolished which prevents any future effort to use these organizations as laboratories for evaluating public participation. In the context of Quebec, there have been such major re-organizations of the RHSSBs that it would no longer be possible to examine the public participation experience in a controlled fashion.

In 2001, a broader group of health system decision makers representing over 100 regional health authorities across the country were surveyed about their public participation practices through a screening survey administered by e-mail. Of the 57 organizational representatives who responded to the survey, over 80% incorporated some type of evaluation into their public participation program. Of these, about 70% categorized their evaluation as “informal” while just over 25% reported using “formal” evaluation methods including surveys and interviews with public participants (Abelson et al., 2004).⁵

6.2 Perspectives from Key Informant Interviews

Our 6 key informants were asked a series of questions about how they approach evaluation within their organizations or departments, what they draw on to inform the design and evaluation of public participation and what barriers exist to conducting public participation. In the sections below, we highlight the themes that arose in our interviews, identifying areas of common ground and disagreement and unique perspectives that are potentially attributable to the level of government or policy sector. For brevity, we have also summarized the key themes arising from the interviews in Table 4. Due to the small number of interviews conducted, our results can provide only a glimpse into these issues but offer, nonetheless, some important and remarkably consistent insights.

6.2.1 Approaches to public participation design

Interviewees were divided in their comments about the sources that inform the design of their public participation processes. Some spoke candidly about their reliance on “grey literature only” and information collected “through web searches”, citing lack of time to do any comprehensive review of the scientific literature. Within this group, one interviewee described the limited use of “best practices” articles given the lack of resources available within their organization to reproduce these practices. Another group of interviewees cited the published scientific literature as one source among others that included “past experiences” and “specialist conferences”. All interviewees discussed the challenges of locating and interpreting the relevance of the published literature to their specific issue and content areas.

6.2.2 Approaches to evaluation

We heard a fairly consistent message from interviewees that evaluation within their departments and organizations is either non-existent or at a nascent stage. Perspectives ranged from evaluation being described as “far off the radar” to “very basic process evaluations that mostly take the form of participants’ satisfaction questionnaires”. One interviewee indicated that while there is no evaluation process built into their public participation processes, there is at times a larger “policy development process evaluation” that might include discussion of the public consultation component. But here again, no formal approach to evaluation was cited, only “lessons learned”. This is not to suggest that evaluation is never built into public participation processes. According to one

⁵ Again, we note that repeated restructuring of the Regional Health Authority community in Canada has made it extremely difficult to carry out any meaningful longitudinal evaluation studies of public participation practices.

interviewee, “evaluations are now built in from the beginning in the methodology of the consultation. But it wasn’t the case in the past.”

TABLE 4 Summary of key themes arising from interviews	
Approaches to evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluation is “really far off the radar” • Informal process (most rely on participants’ satisfaction) • Interested in both process and outcomes issues • Innovation in some organizations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Policy impacts assessed through careful documentation of the decision-making process throughout the consultation
Barriers to evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of time, resources and expertise <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Multiple public participation processes may be implemented at once ▪ Evaluation perceived as a “luxury” ▪ Lack of basic evaluation knowledge within corporate consultation units • Lack of commitment to evaluation from senior management • Difficult to build evaluation capacity within an organization <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Turnover every 2 years ▪ Lack of institutional memory to recall past experiences and to learn from them
How to foster and improve evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need a « culture shift » <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Some departments may be afraid of conducting evaluations. If the results are negative, they could lose their funding or be penalized! • An evaluation framework could be useful <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Framework needs to be flexible and adaptable to different issues and contexts ▪ One framework can’t fit all ▪ Evaluation framework must be integrated in the methodology up-front. • Educate citizens about what constitutes a good public participation process

Interviewees talked about the types of evaluation approaches that might be taken and emphasized that this would “depend on the issue”. For controversial issues, in particular, this interviewee felt “it would be useful to know if it was the appropriate process”. Another suggested that it would be more relevant to evaluate “the bigger [processes]”. Despite the reliance on process indicators, there also appears to be interest in assessing outcomes such as the impacts of public participation process on participants and policy although there was recognition of the challenges of conducting these types of evaluations. One interview suggested that “first-hand knowledge of the impact of public participation on policy comes from organizing the consultation and writing the recommendations.” This was expanded upon by another interviewee who suggested that “evaluation is

informal and based on political experience... the impact of public participation on decision makers is assessed by the number of times the decision makers refer to the consultation.” Only one interviewee described a very explicit process where the impacts of the public participation process on policy are assessed through “a trail of the decision-making process throughout the consultation.”

At the end, the public advisory committee is asked to compare the plan with the recommendations made during the consultation....

6.2.3 Barriers to evaluation

To better understand the reasons for the apparent absence of evaluation, we asked interviewees to discuss the barriers to conducting evaluation. There was a range of responses to this question. Lack of time, resources and expertise topped the list and were the barriers most frequently cited. One interviewee referred to evaluation as a “luxury” that they simply couldn’t afford and were relegated to conducting “quick and dirty” evaluations. In some federal government ministries, where corporate consultation branches provide public consultation expertise, lack of clout appears to pose barriers. As consultants to other government departments, they don’t have “the big stick”. Decisions about whether or not to undertake evaluation are made by the agency or department initiating the public participation process. There is no corporate requirement to undertake evaluation. Moreover, basic evaluation knowledge may be missing in corporate consultation departments where public consultation rather than evaluation expertise is emphasized.

It [evaluation] is not a requirement to get the job... It comes with time, mentoring, trial and error...

More fundamentally, our interviewees identified a lack of commitment to evaluation from senior management within their organizations. A number of interviewees raised concerns about the disproportionate amount of time and resources spent consulting the public as compared to the evaluation of these processes.

If decision-makers are really committed to spend time and resources to listen to the public, they have to be committed to evaluate what they’ve done. They spend a lot of money on consultations and they need to be able to determine if it was worth it.

Interviewees suggested that this lack of commitment might be based on a lack of appreciation for evaluation or recognition of its relevance to the work of the department.

Another concern raised was the lack of uptake of evaluation results:

Why do evaluations if we don’t act upon the results of the evaluation? We need commitment from senior managers, from people with real authority.

To most interviewees, evaluation was assumed to be important but simply not exercised for a variety of ‘institutional’ reasons. One provincial Deputy Minister we interviewed, however, had a slightly different take on the subject of barriers. He stated that a major barrier to conducting evaluation is that it is really hard to do, especially assessing the impacts of public participation on policy and/or participants. Moreover, he questioned the feasibility of this line of research.

How will you ever be able to sort out what impact public participation actually had on policy decisions? Even if it looks like public participation had an influence, it may be that it was simply confirming what policy makers were already going to do.

6.2.4 How to foster evaluation/improve its quality and use

When it came to discussing ways to foster greater evaluation and to improve its quality and use, interviewees were, again, very forthcoming. For some, it is clearly a question of organizational culture in need of change.

“It’s cultural”. [We’re] supposed to be a “learning organization”, but it’s hard to put into practice.

On a related point, this same interviewee suggested that some departments may be afraid of conducting evaluations for fear of loss of funding or negative consequences. This attitude suggests a lack of understanding that conducting an evaluation is an opportunity to learn.

The more we do, the better we’ll get. We need to conduct evaluation more frequently. We also need to conduct the tougher evaluations too. We need to look at the short and medium term outcomes. We need time, resources, and support. We need a culture shift. The organization is not there yet.

Other interviewees focused on more pragmatic needs such as “a good evaluation framework promoted by our department or by central government”. While the importance of an evaluation framework was recognized by a number of interviewees, they were also quick to point out the need for such a framework to be flexible and adaptable to different issues and contexts.

An evaluation framework could be useful. However, the framework needs to be flexible and adaptable to each issue and context. No framework can fit all. Applicability is very important.

At least two interviewees spoke of the need for evaluation that promotes stronger links between public participation and public policy. One interviewee suggested the need to involve people with “real decision-making authority” to ensure the utility of the evaluation and its integration into the overall decision-making process.

Why do an evaluation if there are no consequences?

Another suggested that more emphasis be given to evaluating statute-based public participation processes where there are clearer lines of accountability regarding how the process is to be designed, what questions are to be discussed, what the timeline is for producing recommendations or a final report and what is the expected use of the report in the policy process.

An intriguing suggestion made by one interviewee was to do a better job of publicizing the experiences with public participation, to “open-up people’s eyes” to the importance of evaluating public participation processes because people “simply don’t believe in it”. Related to this is the suggestion that citizens learn more about what constitutes a good public participation process and that some sort of “code of conduct that Canadians understood” might be developed.

The results of our key informant interviews suggest that the nascent state of public participation evaluation probably has more to do with the challenges of fostering an evaluation and evidence-based policy culture within government more generally than with the particular challenges of conducting and using public participation evaluation. Our interviews also reveal that a low level of commitment to public participation within government policy departments can contribute to ambivalence or even resistance toward its evaluation.

7 RESEARCH GAPS

Our review began by documenting the limited body of evidence about the effects of public participation. Without exception, all of the major review articles consulted identified a dearth of good quality research evidence to inform either policy makers or public participation practitioners of the impacts of public participation on political discourse and/or democratic participation. However, each also responded with useful strategies for moving this research area forward. We discuss these in the following sections guided by our conceptual map (Figure 1) presented earlier.

7.1 Evaluate Context More Rigorously

“Better understanding how ... contextual factors – both independently and in interaction with each other – affect the positive and negative consequences of public deliberation should be one of the primary goals of future research.” (Delli Carpini, Cook and Jacobs, 2004:336)

We found a remarkable degree of convergence in the public participation literature about the need for more rigorous study of the role context plays in the public participation process. This resonates with the recent attention being paid to context and its role in the production of evidence to inform and guide policy more broadly (Lomas et al., 2005).

While there has been a marked improvement in the application of explicit and a priori evaluation criteria and definitions to the study of public participation (Carr and Halvorsen, 2001; Petts, 2001), most evaluations still fail to provide decision makers with the research evidence they need to inform subsequent public involvement processes. Public participation study results are often shrouded in language that cautions against generalizing beyond the specific context of this study. In their depiction of “the two views on the role of scientific evidence”, Lomas and colleagues describe the situation as follows:

*... evidence has little meaning or importance for decision-making unless it is adapted to the circumstances of its application. ... In this wider view of what scientific questions might embrace, evidence from the social sciences becomes integral to, not separate from, deliberative processes for creating **context-sensitive guidance** on feasible actions.*

(Lomas et al., 2005:11)

In the public participation evaluation literature, details about the attributes of these contexts are often scarce. To respond to these deficiencies, Rowe and Frewer (2004) have called for categories of *contextual attributes* that are associated with the implementation of public involvement processes, to be developed. These could include, for example, characteristics of the issue (e.g., large scale vs. small scale; degree of scientific uncertainty; level of information required); attributes of the sponsoring organization (e.g., level of commitment to and resources available for public involvement); the type of

decision being made (e.g., planning, priority setting and resource allocation); the decision timeline (e.g., short, medium, long-term) (Einsiedel, 2002). The “context evaluation” section in Figure 1 discussed earlier offers up a suggested list of attributes that might be candidates for more in-depth exploration.

To date, only minimal consideration has been given to developing these contextual attribute categories and to drawing lessons from a comparative analysis of different methods implemented in different contexts (Beierle and Cayford, 2002). We recently completed a comparative quasi-experimental design to test a public participation method based on a generic set of principles and attributes. A one-day deliberative public consultation exercise was carried out in 5 regionalized health systems in Canada. The following contextual variables were found to exert an influence on the implementation of the study and its results: i) socio-political characteristics; ii) aspects of decision-making; iii) community factors; iv) organizational attributes; and researcher-decision maker relationships. Of these, three contextual variables – the organizational and decision making characteristics and researcher-decision maker relationships – were found to influence the implementation process more than the others (Abelson, Gauvin et al., 2005). While these findings represent an early contribution to the more rigorous study of context, they offer confirmatory evidence to support the claims that context truly matters when it comes to the design and implementation of successful public participation processes. They also provide suggestive evidence about the relative roles of different contextual factors.

7.2 Define and Categorize Public Participation Mechanisms More Consistently

With greater consideration given to describing participatory mechanisms and their associated contextual attributes in more general terms, improved theory building about what works and under which circumstances should follow. For example, in the health field, there is now broad acceptance of three major groupings of methods: citizen engagement, consultation and communication (Health Canada, 2000; Calgary Health, 2002). Each of these approaches is distinguished by the level of public participation with which it is associated (e.g., citizen engagement methods involve the public most fully as partners or participation delegates as compared to consultation methods that typically do not). While there are overlaps between them and different classification systems that can be used, these efforts would go a long way toward improving the generalizability of the current evaluation literature.

7.3 Link Empirical Research Studies More Closely to Well-articulated Hypotheses

Our discussion has covered concepts such as user- and theory-based evaluation. Theory-based evaluation is typically associated with the development and testing of hypotheses derived from theories about how public participation should work. In contrast, user-based evaluations are more geared toward the pragmatic interests of policy makers and practitioners. We believe that this “two solitudes” approach should be discouraged and that even the most practical approaches to evaluation can be informed and strengthened by a set of organizationally derived ‘hypotheses’ that can be tested within a public

participation evaluation. These might include predictions about the impact that the presentation of different types of information might have on the participants or the dynamic that might be created by choosing one type of public involvement method over another.

7.4 Use Multiple Disciplinary Perspectives and Methods in Evaluation Design

Data collection methods typically include interviews, surveys (to assess knowledge, attitudes, opinions and behaviour), documentation and observation. Direct observation is one of the most powerful methods for assessing and understanding the processes of participation. An example of how these methods can be usefully combined is taken from a recent report on the evaluation of the UK's National Institute of Clinical Excellence (NICE) Citizens Council. Titled "Opening the Box: Evaluating the Citizens Council of NICE", this evaluation combined the expertise from a number of social science disciplines including social psychology, sociology, organization studies and health policy to devise a three-part evaluation drawing largely on qualitative and ethnographic techniques. Major components included a study of the way in which the citizen engagement initiative took shape and developed in the specific context of its host organization using *document review* and *interviews* as data sources; a before-after analysis of the perceptions of the citizens' involved in the initiative drawing on *telephone interviews* conducted prior to the first Citizens Council meeting and following the third Council meeting held 2 years later, *observations and discussions* held with participants in conjunction with the Council meetings and a *postal questionnaire* that followed the first meeting. A major component of the study involved the *direct observation* of the citizen engagement process itself through the analysis of audio-visual recordings and transcripts of the council meeting deliberations.

7.5 Make Better Use of Real-world Deliberative Experiments to Advance Process and Outcome Evaluation

The example described above illustrates how the current interest in experimenting with deliberative methods can facilitate their use as laboratories for research and evaluation. In the case of NICE's Citizens Council, senior executives within NICE made an explicit decision to treat the Council as an experiment from its early conception and were keen to evaluate it in its formative stages.

Those involved have seen themselves as engaged in a pioneering social experiment and have wanted to convey the lessons learned to an audience that went beyond the confines of a single organization.

(Davies et al., 2005: 8)

We did not come across many examples of the 'openness to evaluation' that was exemplified by NICE. At the same time, it should be noted that there were pragmatic reasons for commissioning the evaluation relating to the organization's desire to determine the 'value added' of this type of initiative.

Not all deliberative experiments are of the scale just described. But any organization that is experimenting with these types of public participation innovations should, at minimum, be open to opportunities presented for conducting evaluation, and if possible, seek these out. Academic and non-governmental organization researchers are a potential untapped resource for this type of work. In the case of academics, they have the theoretical and methodological expertise but need access to research laboratories and, if brought in early enough, can design and implement an evaluation that can serve their interests as well as those of the evaluation sponsors.

7.6 Explore Decision Makers and Their Organizations More Fully as Context and Outcome Variables

In Figure 1, we described the critical role played by public participation sponsors and practitioners in mediating between public participation and its impacts on policy and participants. We depicted a public participation process that exerts influence on decision makers and in turn on the policy decisions for which they are responsible. But decision makers are part of decision making organizations and, as depicted in the context evaluation section of Figure 1, they may exert their impact much earlier on as part of the organizational context within which public participation process is established and implemented. The articulation of a clearer set of relationships between decision makers, their organizations and the influences they exert on each other through the design, implementation and evaluation of public participation would be a useful avenue for further research.

8 PRACTICE AND POLICY GAPS: BARRIERS TO PUBLIC PARTICIPATION, EVALUATION AND ITS UPTAKE

Our interviews revealed that very little public participation evaluation is being undertaken at the present time although steps have been taken to develop public participation evaluation frameworks and toolkits. Most interviewees cited lack of time and resources as a major impediment but others cited lack of commitment from senior levels of government as underpinning these resource deficiencies. Those who were not currently using any kind of evaluation criteria or framework indicated the potential utility of such a framework although there was concern expressed about the potential inflexibility of these frameworks and their lack of applicability to a broad range of issues and contexts.

A more significant and potentially less surmountable obstacle appears to be the lack of organizational commitment to evaluation of any kind that is layered upon an already weakened commitment to public participation. Add to this a healthy skepticism toward public participation and fear of the repercussions associated with negative evaluation outcomes and the prospects for institutionalizing public participation and its evaluation appear remote. The sentiment might be summarized as follows: If you're not serious about public participation, why get serious about evaluating it?

This reiterates the need, as expressed by several interviewees, for a 'culture shift' with respect to both evaluation and public participation. But the requirements for this culture shift to take place (at least on the evaluation side) are not clear. Leslie Pal (2006) traces the evolution of federal government policy regarding program and policy evaluation:

"... we might conclude that evaluation in the Government of Canada plays a relative minor role in operations and review, with periodic harping from the auditor general to maximize the potential of program evaluation for policy decision making. However, events over the last five years suggest that evaluation, or at least policy reflection of a more fundamental sort, is enjoying greater prominence." (Pal, 2005: 314)

Pal goes on to describe the Treasury Board Secretariat's interim evaluation of its evaluation policy in 2003. Implementation of the policy was found to vary significantly among departments. Smaller departments reported limited or non-existent policy evaluation functions and a capacity gap of about one third was found in personnel support to staff evaluation positions. Despite the federal government's 'results, performance and monitoring' agenda, Pal concludes that little evaluation is being done across the federal government (Pal, 2005). Evaluation is still often marginalized in the policy process, viewed skeptically and considered a "frill" compared to direct service delivery. Institutional constraints may explain the lack of evaluation capacity. Canada's parliamentary system tends to be more closed to outside influences as compared to countries such as the US. As a result, the "evaluation climate" may not be as rich in Canada where there are fewer think tanks and organizations that produce evaluation research than in the US (Pal, 2005: 319).

8.1 Promising Trend?

The overwhelming level of popular support received for the BC Citizens Assembly Single Transferable Vote proposal is an example of evaluation in its simplest form. On voting day, the STV proposal received more than 50% of the votes in 77 of the 79 electoral districts, and was supported by 57.69% of voters. This fell just short of reaching the double threshold set out by the Government in the Referendum Act.⁶ Nevertheless, the receipt of such overwhelming support for a reform proposal of this specificity suggests that there was something about the Assembly process that was highly credible and that exuded legitimacy. In essence, the public engagement process used was considered so successful that it gave the general public the confidence to overwhelmingly support the proposal. In a colloquium held to discuss the Assembly, a group of democratic theory scholars concluded the following:

[W]e believe this is the first time it has been shown that an institutional innovation can reduce democratic deficits clearly and dramatically. The process "...will produce demonstration effects that will be crucially important as the consolidated democracies struggle with falling citizen trust in government..." [T]he more voters knew about the Citizens' Assembly the more likely they were to vote yes."

BC's Citizens Assembly on electoral reform has received a tremendous amount of attention and, as the above quote suggests, it is considered by some a unique example of a public participation mechanism that has exerted positive effects on citizens' knowledge, capacity and trust in public institutions. Others have suggested that the Canadian citizens' assembly experiences represent watershed events in the struggle to overcome "the democratic malaise that haunts the land" (Carty, 2005). Over time, this experience may foster the political will necessary to overcome some of the barriers discussed above.

⁶ To pass the referendum, at least 60% of the valid votes province-wide needed to be in favour of the referendum, and the referendum also needed to receive the support of more than 50% of the valid votes in at least 48 (60%) of the 79 electoral districts.

9 CONCLUSIONS

Despite decades of documenting public participation experiences, the practice of public participation evaluation is still in its infancy. Modest progress is being made in the form of evaluation frameworks and criteria that are being applied more routinely and consistently. More work is needed, however, to reach agreement about a common set of evaluation criteria, the defining features of public participation mechanisms and how to categorize and evaluate the crucial role of contextual variables in shaping and influencing public participation. To achieve these goals, we encourage forums that bring together public participation scholars, practitioners and policy makers from a variety of policy sectors and levels of governance for the purposes of general knowledge exchange, but also with the specific objectives of seeking agreement about evaluation frameworks and criteria and, in particular, the balance between generic and specific frameworks. These types of exchanges will also promote the identification of potential research laboratories and ‘live experiments’ for researchers to test theory that can directly inform practice. Should they be successful, these exchanges may help shift current views toward public participation evaluation from “frill” to “essential”.

APPENDIX 1 - POSITION DESCRIPTIONS OF INTERVIEWEES

- Federal Government Minister
- Provincial Deputy Minister
- Senior Consultation Advisor, Health Canada
- Counsel, Public Law Policy Section, Ministry of Justice
- Coordinator, Community Consultation and Partnerships, Regional Health Authority
- Communications consultant

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