



This is a repository copy of *Communicative capacity: public encounters in participatory theory and practice*, by Koen P. R Bartels.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:  
<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/141993/>

Version: Accepted Version

---

**Article:**

Connelly, S. (2016) *Communicative capacity: public encounters in participatory theory and practice*, by Koen P. R Bartels. *Critical Policy Studies*, 10 (3). pp. 382-384. ISSN 1946-0171

<https://doi.org/10.1080/19460171.2016.1232346>

---

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Critical Policy Studies* on 14/10/2016 available online:  
<http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/19460171.2016.1232346>

**Reuse**

Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

**Takedown**

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing [eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk) including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



[eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk)  
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

**Bartels, Koen, P.R., 2015. *Communicative capacity: Public encounters in participatory theory and practice*, Bristol: Policy Press. 304 pp. ISBN: 9781447318507.**

The core of Bartels' book is a well-crafted and realistic account of three contrasting 'public encounters' in Scotland, the Netherlands and Italy, which make for a stimulating read. He also puts forward an innovative and effective analytical framework for the examination and comparison of the cases. Finally he draws on American philosopher and management theorist Mary Follett's work, to explain why these cases – like so many similar encounters - are relatively unsuccessful, and to provide a normative theory for better engagement between state officials and the public.

These are linked by Bartels' focus on the practices of all concerned, and so to emphasising the obvious but rarely examined fact that encounters take place between real people. How they create and manage their relationships is therefore of paramount importance in determining how well (or badly!) the encounters evolve. While he clearly positions himself in the lineage of the deliberative turn, his empirically plausible claim is that while more public participation has taken place it hasn't necessarily been very good, and to understand this we need a normative and explanatory framework other than democratic theory.

This is a very welcome approach, as is Bartels' engagement with the ordinary and not very successful. The book – and many subsequent chapters - opens with long quotations from participants in public encounters, setting the scene for a story firmly grounded in real people's practice. We are then straight into the big claims (6):

- 1) that encounters can be analysed in terms of how people engage with their situation, discuss substantive issues, and build and maintain relationships;
- 2) that these processes are usually dominated by 'habitual patterns of communication' which render them ineffective; and
- 3) this problem can be solved by reflection, which enables these habits to be recognised and broken.

This is a straightforward call for more reflective practice, and can be seen as a 'weak' version of the book's overall thesis. The argument goes two steps further, though, drawing on Follett's work (as adapted by Stout) to create a 'strong' version.

- 4) Since habits are the problem, they must be left aside and replaced by 'adapting the nature, tone and conditions of communication to the law of the situation' (6) i.e. the situational logic from which it will be clear, for instance, who should take the lead regardless of their formal, institutional or habitual role (30).
- 5) Reaching such understanding requires those involved (as well as analysts) to see encounters as relational and unending processes of becoming, which take place 'in-between' [sic] participants and through which participants manage to 'integrate' all their ideas, identities and outcomes (10) in accordance with the 'total situation' (30). Only such engagement can generate legitimate outcomes.

These are bold and innovative claims, with significant practice implications. Chapter Two elaborates the theoretical material, and in passing provides a very useful review of the literature on public encounters, and is followed by an admirably detailed methodology chapter. Four long empirical chapters follow, dealing in turn with communicative patterns and the three elements of the analytical framework - situation, substantive issues and relationships – for the three cases. Bartels identifies contrasting habitual patterns of communication which allow differing kinds of limited success, but which collectively produce a uniform story of low communicative capacity. In consequence the potential of often well-meant initiatives is stifled. These chapters are systematic and engaging, though rather irritatingly presented with a plethora of bold and italic text to mark analytical themes. Each chapter ends with conclusions drawing out general lessons, and in principle making recommendations for how problematic habits can be tackled. However, these tend to amplify the analysis rather than identifying *how* problems might be addressed. The book then provides overall conclusions and recommendations. Pulling together the comparisons – summarised in a very neat table – Bartels demonstrates compellingly that things *could* be different. While bad habits are found everywhere, they are also different in different places, and therefore can be changed.

These chapters are very general in their claims, both in analysis and prescriptions. As with any case-based study, the issue of what can be generalised and how local differences matter is important. Yet this is left unaddressed, though a persuasive argument could be made here that if three such different cases can be brought inductively under a single coherent framework, then the underlying mechanisms may be very general.

But the ‘strong’ version of the framework is unconvincing. Although arguably the need to focus on the human relationships involved in public encounters is self-evident, Follett’s work is not well-justified as the best approach. There are other ways of theorising these, which might, for instance, pay more attention to the realities of power relationships. As it stands the Follettian claims about what constitutes a good encounter – coupled with the empirically dubious denial that democratic norms play any part in encounters’ ‘goals, dynamics, outcomes and legitimacy’ (9) – look simply like another unjustified imposition of a set of norms. Moreover, the concept of ‘habitual patterns’ isn’t robust enough to do the work required of it. ‘Habits’ are simply a given, and for Bartels principally ‘bad’ – but surely they too are relational products of everyday social encounters? We need a discussion of what habits are and where they come from, and in particular how they might change. In the cases, we are presented with people recognising that things aren’t working and struggling to find new ways of communicating (see e.g. 142-3), but it isn’t clear how this is qualitatively different from habit-breaking reflection - the difference appears to be a matter of degree but not of kind. Further, it is not clear how the prevalent habit of *not* reflecting might be broken – a crucial step in the move to better encounters. This all suggests that the conceptual binary between old habits and new patterns is too strongly drawn.

This problematic binary is echoed in the idea that prior normative commitments, habits and power inequalities should be erased and that the shared experience of being embedded in the ‘total situation’ will lead all to recognise ‘the right thing to do’ (38), as if structural

differences were non-existent or at least surmountable by deliberation and individual agency. Without wanting to rehash old debates, this seems at least implausible as a normative ideal. The analytic separation of 'the situation' is the problem: there cannot be a completely independent internal logic, as any recognition of 'right' action will necessarily be based on prior norms and relationships. Bartels himself implicitly seems to acknowledge this, as in none of his cases does he attempt to describe 'the law of the situation', but merely exhorts practitioners to understand it and act accordingly. Certainly communication and collective reflection may help people analyse situations and potentially revise their positions – as deliberative theorists have long argued – but this doesn't emerge in any pure way from the situation itself.

These problems with Bartels' 'strong' thesis undermine the core of the recommendations. That 'practitioners and policy makers ... need to develop a willingness to be patient and trustful' (235) is uncontentious, but we need more on how and why they might do this – still more on how and why they might become more collectively attentive to relationships in a Follettian way. What is needed is a more sophisticated and realistic account of the relationships between norms, habits, reflection and action, which recognises the way public encounters are inextricably embedded in the rest of peoples' social lives. Such an account might draw on the synthesis of norms and actions inherent in practice theory, or on the dialectical approaches to social-individual relationships of recent developments in institutionalist theory. Also needed is a practical theory of how reflection works and can be promoted, with Schön's work an obvious starting point.

To some extent these theoretical difficulties don't matter. Although the book's strong thesis is unconvincing, there is much here to make it worth reading, even if it is less uniquely different from the roll-call of other 'excellent studies' that Bartels cites (Healey, Forester, Wagenaar *et al.*). The weak thesis – that public encounters can be improved through reflection on, and adjustment of, habitual patterns of communication - is coherent in itself and consistent with the bulk of the empirical material. It is valuable both in providing a useful analytical framework, and in refocusing our attention on the relational and reflexive side of public encounters.

**Stephen Connelly**

**Department of Urban Studies & Planning, University of Sheffield**