

## Planner Choice of Public Involvement Format

### Dissertation Concept Overview

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**Purpose:** This research aims to identify and describe factors that influence planners' choice of public participation format.

**Research questions:** How do we understand the design of public participation as a socially constructed process? What factors influence planners' choice of public participation format and to what extent? How do planners think about options and possibilities related to public participation?

**Design/methodology/approach:** Semi-structured interviews based on the critical incident interview technique will explore the variations in participation formats that planners use and the way that situational factors and planner traits influence their choice of format. Transcripts will be analyzed using thematic template analysis.

**Population, sampling, and recruitment:** The population is people who are both currently employed in a planning-related job in the United States (including planning, architecture, engineering, landscape architecture, and facilitation) and who have influenced decisions about government-sponsored public participation related to urban planning in the last three years. Since there is no list of this population, purposive sampling will access the population through the researcher's professional network and through listservs that discuss related topics. Sample size will be 10-20, with the goal of saturation in content.

**Expected findings:** Thematic analysis of critical incident interviews will result in (1) a "thick" description of the decision-making process related to the design of public participation processes and (2) identification and analysis of potential factors that influence planners' choice of formats. A variety of personal trait factors and situational factors, both related to motivation and resources, are expected to influence choice of participation method. The strength of influence of different factors is unknown.

Hypothesized factors include:

*Situational factors related to motivation:*

1. Instrumental reasons (information needed to plan, strategic use, issue impasse)
2. Support or opposition of public officials/clients/management for public participation
3. Phase of project or decision
4. Purpose of participation event
5. Planner's expectations about participants
6. Legal and/or grant requirements

*Situational factors related to resources:*

7. Project team's knowledge/skill in facilitating different public involvement formats
8. Time
9. Budget
10. Physical resources
11. Access to relevant networks

*Planner trait factors related to motivation:*

12. Personal/professional values/attitudes about participation
13. Planner's perception of previous public involvement experiences as positive/negative

*Planner trait factors related to resources:*

14. Planner's knowledge/skill in facilitating different public involvement formats ("standard process," knowledge of engagement options, training in facilitation/engagement)

*Other:*

15. Planner's demographics (Length of time as planner, gender, race, subspecialty, personality traits)

**Research limitations:** As a qualitative study, the research will contribute to understanding the phenomenology of planners' perspectives about choosing public participation formats, but will not be able to quantify the extent of influence of different factors. The results will also have limited generalizability: since there is no comprehensive frame for the universe of planners, a nonprobability purposive/availability sample will be used for the interviews.

**Originality/value:** Existing research demonstrates little empirical understanding of (1) how decisions related to public participation are made through a social process, and (2) what factors influence choices that public managers make regarding what kind of participation opportunities to offer, even though planners make significant choices influencing the availability, timing, and format of public participation opportunities. Since there is widespread agreement that the way public participation is commonly conducted is not optimal, it is important to improve planners' decision-making about what kinds of public participation opportunities to offer the public.

**Practical implications:** This research could identify which factors are the most likely potential targets for improving planners' choices shaping participation opportunities, potentially improving the policymaking results and satisfaction levels with public participation processes.