

# Social Equity of Public Participation Environments

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To address the lack of research on institutional barriers to public participation, we examine participation environments by studying neighborhood commissions. Using the Strategic Action Field Framework for Implementation Research, we illustrate how city-level policies interact with commissions and organizational-level driving forces to create experiences for citizens. Data were analyzed using structural and elaborative coding and suggest there is value in using the cultural frames of strict father and nurturing parent as an interpretive tool. The strict father frame shapes the environment via norms, policies, and practices, and communicates preferences for citizen identities. Time pressures reinforce this frame. To realize environments that advance social equity, findings reveal that three conditions must be present: a) nurturing parent norms, practices, and policies that are coupled with a consensus on the purpose of participation, b) mutual understanding of past racist policies, and c) trust between actors. Seven propositions are offered for further study.

## Public Participation Environments

It is well-established that public institutions and the associated opportunities for the public to participate in decision-making are not neutral spaces (Arnstein 1969; Blume 2022; Fraser 1990; Holley 2016). Public participation opportunities can exclude people based on a number of identities, including race, gender, ethnicity, immigration status, and class. However, much of the previous research on public participation in public administration and related fields focuses on individual barriers to participation (e.g., income, education, time, skills); considerably less scholarship focuses on structural and institutional barriers to participation (Clark 2018).

Practice has shown that public participation environments are often hostile to more socially equitable

processes of engagement, despite an authentic desire by practitioners and decision-makers to ensure that everyone has a voice in public decision-making (Holley 2016). This could, in part, be a result of public participation designers' focus on *access* to decision-making tables, which misses an important aspect of procedural equity, namely inclusion in the process (Quick and Feldman 2011). Allowing citizens to express viewpoints is important, and it is commonplace that laws allow them to do so during the policymaking process, but this is just one facet of social equity (Guy and McCandless 2012). Public participation laws are not designed to create environments conducive to inclusion, providing the participants with the necessary conditions to express their viewpoints on matters important to them (Fung and Wright 2001; Nabatchi and Leighninger 2015). As such, socially equitable public participation environments are contexts and condi-

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We are deeply indebted to our city partners and all the commissioners with whom we worked. We are inspired by the dedication of city leadership, staff, and commissioners to public service and a desire to create more equitable and inclusive participation environments. We thank 2022 Public Management Research Conference participants who provided feedback on a draft. This work was supported by the Ohio State University's Seed Fund for Racial Justice.

tions that support fair and impactful representation and inclusion in decision-making on matters important to participants. Social equity in these environments matters materially, whether it is how public problems are characterized (e.g., police brutality versus public safety), how public dollars are distributed, or who is impacted by laws and regulations.

As a result of a decade of practice, Holley (2022) describes public participation environments as comprised of settings where people interact with one another in order to deliberate, decide, and react to community decision-making. These environmental conditions are often communicated through a set of cultural indicators, learned throughout individuals' lives, which signal appropriate behaviors, talking points, and solutions for public deliberation. Depending on the various contexts and settings, people have differing influences over those community decisions. The context and the setting are determined by those who are in positions of control over the decision-making process, which are often determined by their social and professional networks (Domhoff 2010; La Due Lake and Huckfeldt 1998). Those in control benefit from their orientation to existing contexts and settings, leading them to reproduce existing power structures.

Public participation environments can be understood through a set of commonly held cultural frames that tend to determine how people interact with one another in an engagement setting (Holley 2022). Framing is a long-standing concept in public administration and policy-making that includes how public problems (and, therefore, solutions) and target populations are socially constructed. Framing results in what and who deserves attention (Schneider and Ingram 1993). These frames signal preferences for certain settings, issues, and processes that lead to policies that shape parameters for participation. Parameters are rounded out by practices that create the rituals for interaction and sensemaking. Taken together, they create a context for engagement by setting expectations, assumptions, and shared meanings for interactions.

Holley (2022) considers two predominant frames, the strict father and nurturing parent. While Holley draws from Lakoff (2004), one can look to the work of Stivers (1995) in the field of public administration. The strict father corresponds to the view that a single moral authority must be obeyed to navigate and sur-

vive in a world characterized by self-interest, whereas the nurturing parent view centers on communication and collaboration to make the world better for all in society. The strict father cultural frame can be traced back to Eurocentric, imperialist notions of manifest destiny, chattel slavery, and the oppression of women (Fraser 1990; Guerrero 2003; Smith 2012). The single moral authority is invested with power to judge and punish; believes self-discipline is a way to adhere to that authority; protects "good" children from dangerous cultural "others" and disciplines "bad" children; frames racial, cultural, and social others as "children" who must be disciplined into behaving; and believes the world to be a competitive place where winners take all and problems are a result of personal failings. Most laws guiding direct participation reflect the strict father worldview (Nabatchi and Leighninger 2015).

Conversely, engagement within communities of color has led to the more expansive nurturing parents' worldview. Holley builds on Lakoff's (2004), original model, using cultural and deliberative traditions from the African, Latino, and Asian diasporas, as well as Indigenous North American communities and feminist circles (Allen 2013; Awortwi 2013; Chilisa, Major, and Khudu-Petersen 2017; Cole 2006; Deloria 1998; Duxtater 2011; Frankenberg 1997; Fraser 1990; Gutierrez and Lewis 1994; Smith 2012; Tew 2002; Whitney-Squire 2016). The nurturing parent includes beliefs that power and moral authority are developed and shared by a whole and diverse community; children are naturally good and should be nurtured toward self-determination; individual success should lead to success for the community; any problems are a result of problems in the community; and communities are responsible for uncovering harmful truths and bringing about reconciliation.

Participants respond to how the public is constructed in these environments by expressing different identities; for example, the identities of citizen, consumer, and advocate, among others (Roberts 2004). These identities motivate participation, but they can also be used to legitimize participation and specific arguments, depending on meeting content.

To analyze social equity in public participation environments, we explore a multisite case of neighborhood commissions, which serve as an important connective tissue between a city and its residents

(Cooper, Bryer, and Meek 2006). Commissions are a common form of participation in the United States, where the state is intentionally seeking engagement from citizens. We first provide context for neighborhood commissions, followed by a description of Moulton and Sandfort's (2017) Strategic Action Field for Implementation Research (SAF), which provides the theoretical framework for our study. We then describe the case, data, and analytical methods. Finally, we combine the findings with discussion to offer seven propositions for further study.

### Neighborhood Commissions

The emergence of neighborhood commissions was a direct response to the effects of the rational planning model, which was a positivist, top-down, technocratic approach to urban planning (Reece 2018). Urban renewal, federal highway programs, and federal redlining policies eviscerated many urban neighborhoods, disproportionately harming predominately Black neighborhoods. For example, in Columbus, Ohio, Bronzeville (a historically African American neighborhood) was first cut off by highway construction and then remade by urban renewal policies, which further concentrated poverty in new high-rise public housing developments. Hanford Village, formerly a small predominantly Black suburb, was simply cut in half by the development of I-70. I-70 was initially supposed to run north of the community, cutting through the southern end of a wealthy, White suburb, but these residents protested. Hanford Village's surviving parcels were then absorbed by Columbus through annexation in the years following the construction of I-70. Both neighborhoods were also redlined.

As a result of these policies, civil rights advocates called for new models of community-based planning focused on the needs of marginalized communities (Teaford 2000). Radical departures in traditional planning theory would emerge in the form of new theoretical constructs of citizen empowerment (Arnstein 1969) and advocacy (Davidoff 1965). The emergence and growth of neighborhood commissions in the late 20th century directly reflect these theories. As citizen advisory bodies, neighborhood commissions were advocates for neighborhood and community needs, while empowering citizens to act in an advisory or decision-making role (Garrison 2011).

However, neighborhood commissions are often at risk of being dominated by middle- or upper-class professionals, who are often encouraged to participate by people within their personal networks (Stout, Dougherty, and Dudley 2017). Even the most knowledgeable commission members can lack a general awareness of their roles and responsibilities regarding land use decision-making (Stout et al. 2017). The participation environments themselves do not necessarily allow for deliberation, as communication is often one-way between a commission and agencies, and public input often does not significantly impact agency decisions. When researching advisory councils and participatory budgeting, Fernández-Martínez, García-Espín, and Jiménez-Sánchez (2020) found that participants get frustrated when expectations are not set and mutually understood, participation design is found to be dysfunctional, and there are no adjustment mechanisms to correct dysfunctions that arise. Their study also found, specifically, that confusion surrounding the role and scope of these neighborhood organizations was the primary reason that citizens became disillusioned with their impact.

Finally, neighborhood commissions, focus on land use decision-making, and highlight norms of homeownership as homeowners are positively constructed citizens and policy actors. Homeowners are incentivized to protect this asset and, moreover, to encourage increases in its value. This is done by keeping supply low or by advocating that only housing considered to be of the same or greater value be built nearby. Evidence demonstrates that the institution of homeownership is racialized. For example, in Columbus, Ohio, White residents have a 52% rate of homeownership as compared to 31.4% of Black residents (Mattingly et al. 2022). Redlining plus exclusionary and expulsive zoning policies prevented Black Americans from achieving rates of homeownership comparable to those of White Americans and historically confined Black Americans to neighborhoods where homes are valued significantly lower than comparable white neighborhoods. For instance, for decades the Federal Housing Administration tied federal mortgage insurance issuance qualifications to the presence of racially restrictive covenants and promoted a myth that the mixing of racial and social classes harms property values (Slater 2021).

### Theoretical Framework

Moulton and Sandfort's (2017) Strategic Action Field Framework for Implementation Research provides the structure and sociological theory for analysis. In particular, the SAF framework illustrates how a singular policy interacts with individual organizations, and together with organizational-level driving forces, creates unique experiences for the target population. The framework allows us to explore social equity in participation environments as an emergent property.

Policy implementation is carried out through complex systems. To incorporate this complexity, Moulton and Sandfort base their framework on Fligstein and McAdam's (2011, 2012) strategic action field theory. The theory illustrates how social systems are set up in organizations to act collectively (Rainey 2009; Scott and Davis 2015). Action is enabled through collective understandings of the intention of action, relationships within the field, and the rules of the game (Fligstein and McAdam 2011, 2012). At any one time, there are multiple and overlapping fields, which can operate at different levels.

Moulton and Sandfort build on Fligstein and McAdam (2011, 2012) by integrating theory on social skills to recognize that while social structures shape implementation outcomes, actors co-create those structures through their own agency. Actors simultaneously interpret their environment and produce, reproduce, and alter their public services to "build common understanding and reconcile competing sources of authority to enable collective action" (Moulton and Sandfort 2017, 145). Because of the scales and potential overlapping of SAFs, a single policy, law, or rule may be considered differently by actors in each field, from the importance of a directive to how it will be implemented. Within each field, actors are tempered by a recognition that they need to illustrate some conformity to what is perceived as acceptable norms to maintain legitimacy and demonstrate the need for sociability (as opposed to being motivated by self-interest). For example, an actor believes strict use of Robert's Rules of Order does not allow new members of the organization to develop relationships and wants to use a different approach to running meetings. Yet Robert's Rules have been used since the organization was founded, so instead of suggesting a radical change, the actor

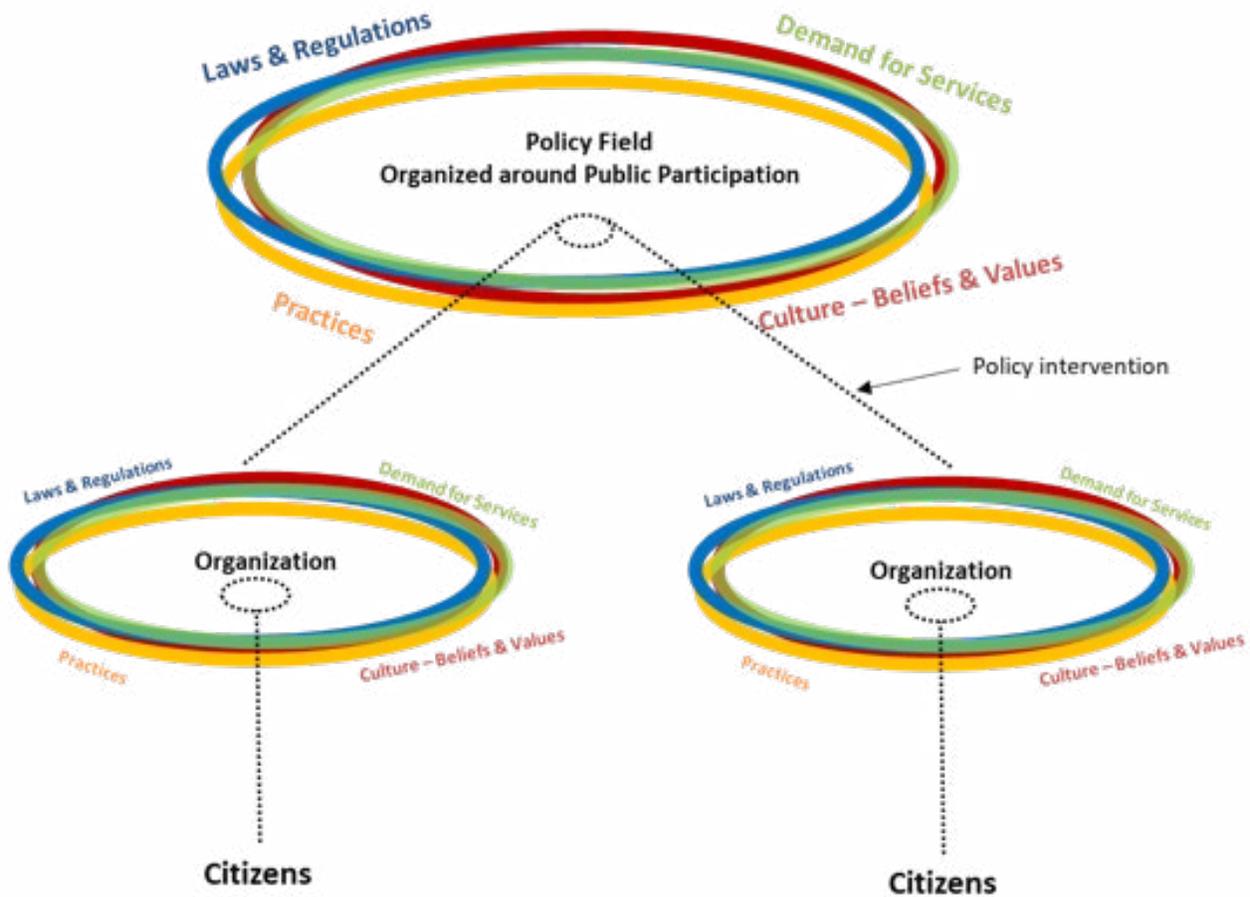
suggests Martha's Rules, a simpler, modified version of Robert's Rules.

Moulton and Sandfort (2017) add a focus on the policy intervention to SAFs. The policy intervention connects organizations across scales: the policy field (or the networks of organizations that carry out a policy in a locale), organizations, and the front lines (Moulton and Sandfort 2017; Stone and Sandfort 2009). Organizations, as a meso-level phenomenon, interpret what is assembled in the policy field to provide a public service (Ray 2019; Roberts 2020). Historical relationships shape organizational interpretations within the policy field and the amount of discretion given to the front line (Lipsky 2010; Mettler and SoRelle 2018). For example, if an organization is embedded in a broader policy field that has well-established funders, the organization is likely to propose an approach to service delivery that is acceptable to that funder.

Moulton and Sandfort (2017) offer four drivers of change and stability that shape rules and norms to guide behavior at each scale: 1) the political authority that comes from laws and regulations; 2) economic authority derived through market forces, or demand for services in the case of public participation; 3) culture, meaning shared beliefs and values that act as a cognitive framework; and, 4) professional norms and practices that shape what is considered possible. Figure 1 illustrates the multiple SAFs and levels connected by the policy intervention, which is public participation in this case, and the drivers of change and stability.

While Moulton and Sandfort emphasize how actors have agency to utilize social skills to make change, certain cultural norms, practices, and rules often dominate in SAFs. Indeed, mainstream organizations tend to be driven by adherence to the norms of whiteness, which position the White experience as "normal" or "standard." Those with access to or claims of whiteness benefit from the power associated with aligning with dominant norms. Although sometimes termed "invisible" power, this type of power is readily recognized by those racialized as non-White (Gaventa 2007; Lukes 1974/2005; Ray 2019). Invoking invisible power does not aim to rid the theoretical framework of agency, but rather to reinforce how environmental conditions do not support the positioning and power of agents equally.

Figure 1. Strategic Action Field Framework Applied to Public Participation Environments



Note: Adapted from Moulton and Sandfort (2017).

**Methods**

The purpose of this research is to explore social equity as an emergent property of public participation environments. To do this, we employ a multimethod approach in a multisite case study applying the SAF framework.

**The Case**

Our study is based in Ohio’s capital city of Columbus, a midwestern city of just under one million people. Our team chose Columbus as a case because members of the research team were aware that the city is keenly interested in creating greater social equity in its neighborhood commissions. The city supported this study’s proposal.

The legislation establishing neighborhood commissions was passed by the city council of Columbus in the early 1970s. There are now over 20 commissions in the city. City code defines a twofold purpose for the commissions as both advisors and community liaisons. Specifically, they are to review and recommend action on zoning variance or rezoning requests, identify and study

problems in the area, promote communication within their area and with the city, and review and recommend programs for area enhancements and services. All commissioners are recommended by the current commissions and then appointed by the mayor. Commissioners are sometimes selected from sub-neighborhood districts, while others serve at-large, and some are selected to represent certain interests, such as the local business community, area nonprofits, or religious institutions.

The Department of Neighborhoods, a department of the Columbus city government, oversees the commissions, most directly through liaisons. Only some liaisons possess planning or development expertise. Each liaison is responsible for a few area commissions. Liaisons also work directly with residents by helping them connect to city services.

We selected four neighborhood commissions for additional data collection via observation and semi-structured interviews (described in the next subsections). Given the SAF framework, we sought to have commis-

**Table 1. Broad Comparison of the Four Selected Sites**

Site	Relative age of the area commission	Best practice adoption	Relative degree of growth	Racial composition of residents (2019)
Site 1. Lower Growth Mixed Neighborhood	Newer	No	Lower	43% Black and 46% White
Site 2. Higher Growth Black Neighborhood	Older	No	Higher	58% Black and 33% White
Site 3. Lower Growth White Neighborhood	Older	Yes	Lower	22% Black and 69% White
Site 4. Higher Growth Mixed Neighborhood	Newer	Yes	Higher	52% Black and 38% White

sions with varying relationships within the policy field, levels of development, and development contexts to learn across a variety of participation environments. We used adoption of the city’s best practices as an indicator of the commissions’ relationships to the policy field, selecting two commissions that adopted the city neighborhood department’s best practices and two commissions that did not. Indicators of development pressure included the number of permits sought for new construction and major alterations of commercial, multi-family, and single-family homes in the past 10 years. Commissions with higher development pressure tend to see more competition for commission seats signaling the existence of multiple divergent views on how to approach development within those neighborhoods. Varied contexts of development include selecting places that have historic impediments to development and those that do not, as well as places experiencing mostly new construction versus alternation of existing structures. Finally, we selected commissions that varied in terms of racial composition, both within the neighborhoods represented and among the members of the commissions themselves. Table 1 provides a comparison of the four sites.

**Document Analysis**

Our team analyzed several types of documents across all commissions. First, the Department of Neighborhoods offers commissions a set of best practices. The best practices were designed to help commissions maintain compliance with applicable laws, build skills, boost the level of dialogue in meetings, encourage succession planning, and ensure consistent experiences and expectations for engagement. Next, 605 city bulletins from January 2010 to July 2021 were analyzed to gain insight into how frequently the neighborhood commissions,

the development commission, and the city disagreed on their recommendations for projects. The city bulletin is prepared by the city clerk and outlines “all ordinances and resolutions acted upon by Columbus City Council, all bids and notices and City Code changes.” The bulletins were compiled from the City of Columbus website. Each bulletin entry that involved a neighborhood commission recommendation was coded for agreement or disagreement between the neighborhood commission and either the development commission or city. Finally, using NewsBank (an online news database) we searched local media for any mention of the neighborhood commissions to document their history and provide context for our analysis.

**Neighborhood Commission Liaison Focus Group**

In April 2021, we held a one-hour focus group with all area commission liaisons and their supervisor via Zoom. We recorded this discussion and transcribed the audio for analysis. The purpose was to document liaisons’ thoughts regarding the ability of neighborhood commissions to attract diverse community participants and to create a socially equitable environment for community engagement.

**Observations and Semi-Structured Interviews**

We conducted observations and semi-structured interviews in the four area commissions we selected for more in-depth study until the research group reached a consensus that saturation had been achieved. Three of the authors were the main observers. Team members attended a variety of area commission meeting types, including main, planning and zoning, and community engagement meetings. We observed 28 meetings, totaling approximately 56 hours. Initially, the team observed two meetings and then compared notes using a rubric to track elements of the public participation environment.

The rubric was designed so each observer noted practices and citizen identities and provided examples. After the first two meetings, the rubric was adjusted, and observations were then conducted separately. About half of these separate observations included another author to compare notes afterward.

Thirty-five interviews were conducted with commissioners, zoning applicants, and those who did not attend meetings. These interviews typically lasted 50 minutes. The goal was to gain a deeper understanding of the practices and culture of the area commissions from internal, external, and adjacent perspectives. The questions for the commissioners fell under three main categories: personal background and motivation for joining the commission, meeting procedures, and the participant experience, including the role of the commission when it comes to matters of race. Interview questions for interviewees who have been zoning applicants were concerned with their experiences in commission meetings, how they were invited to participate, what kind of conflict they observed and how it was resolved, how race manifested itself in the commission, and how the commission could improve.

The authors also wanted to know why people, and especially local community leaders, did not attend these meetings. To do so, we asked non-attendees questions related to their personal involvement in the community, how they view the role of the commission, why they or their organization does not attend commission meetings, how visible and valuable they feel the commission is to the community, the role of race in the commission, and any improvements the commission could make.

### ***Analytical Approach***

The main analytical approach for the data included deductive coding (structural coding) using the elements in Figure 1 and inductive coding (emergent coding) to capture emergent themes related to the research purpose by team members (Saldaña 2015). Given that the objective was not to count codes, but rather interpret observations, interviews, and documents, the team approached consensus using intense group deliberation, or “dialogical intrasubjectivity” with coder adjudication (Saldaña 2015). Deliberation resulted in shared meaning and understanding of the data and how it related to the purpose of the study.

Deliberation took place from February 2021 to March 2022. At first, the team met weekly, before

switching to every two weeks as observations and interviewing got underway. After all data were collected, the team engaged in two half-day retreats in December 2021. In January 2022, the team started meeting every week again. We found the concepts of strict father and nurturing parent presented earlier to be useful in interpreting findings. During all meetings, the team kept shared notes via online note-taking.

To ensure research quality and rigor, we employed the theory-based framework to guide analysis, prolonged engagement with neighborhood commissions, multiple investigators to collect data, phased our data collection, documented and peer-debriefed while data collecting, iterated between data collection and analysis, triangulated between sources, did consensus-based coding with multiple coders, and grounded findings in examples (Nowell and Albrecht 2019).

## **Findings and Discussion**

The following subsections step through the SAF framework starting with the purpose of neighborhood commissions (the throughline that holds the scales of the SAF together), the relationship between the commissions and the broader policy field, and the four drivers for implementation of public participation. Each subsection presents the findings, coupled with a discussion of those findings, and offers propositions for further study. The final subsection summarizes and compares the four cases selected for deeper investigation and offers additional propositions for further study.

### ***The Purpose of Neighborhood Commissions***

The city code states that neighborhood commissions facilitate communication, understanding, and cooperation among city officials, neighborhood groups, and developers. As described earlier, commissions came forth during a time when urban neighborhoods wanted some control over broader development processes. Minority neighborhoods were motivated to address the historic impacts from disinvestment, redlining, and highway development in their neighborhoods. Five decades later, the commissions have become a catch-all for community engagement for some interviewees. There is a tension inherent in commissions that seem to be tasked with the contradictory missions of adjudicating development proposals and being the voice of the community (particularly needed because all city councilors are elected at-large versus a ward system).

As one commissioner stated, “The only thing that is required, absolutely required of a commission, is reviewing the rezonings, giving a recommendation on rezonings or variances. That is it. Everything else that a commission wants to be, they form of themselves and their own bylaws and take on by themselves.” However, another commissioner stated, “I believe the community is asking us to do more than zoning and planning.” Indeed, we witnessed an exchange about this during a meeting, when a resident voiced concern that the commissioners could not serve them in the way that the resident thought they should. As such, because zoning decisions are required by the city to move an application forward, obligating that zoning decisions be on the agenda, they become a point of conflict and dissatisfaction when unrelated issues are expressed.

In three of the neighborhood commissions, and among liaisons, these different perceptions of commission purpose appear to fall along racial, age, income, and other identity fault lines. For example, in one commission, older, Black, longer-term commissioners appear to focus solely on development—this faction wants investment and economic growth. They are likely driven by the history of disinvestment from the city (and now welcome any investment). The younger, White, newer commissioners in this same commission are more concerned with affordability and process. They also hope that their reforms can change the commission’s procedures. As such, they see an expanded role for the commission. Racial and class conflicts dominate this commission, underlying nearly every decision. Given that racial tension appears to be embedded in the history of neighborhood development, it raises a broader question about whether or not the commissioners can accomplish the goals they have today without attending to the historical underpinnings of racial divides.

Another example of tension is that city staff want commissioners to simultaneously “represent the neighborhood” and adhere to the dominant cultural frame of the strict father. Adhering to the dominant frame, however, requires that commissioners leave their own identities at the door and discourages acknowledgment of any historical power relations (e.g., as a result of redlining) or current conflict (e.g., protests against the police or protests related to tax abatements).

The city’s neighborhood department best practices are supported by builders and developers. In apparent support of standardization, one developer stated, “I ...

think the city is allowing these commissions to just run wild. They’re not uniform at all, they’re all different. It should be consistent.” The best practices state that the commissions exist to give citizens the option to participate in decision-making in an advisory capacity to the city, in addition to facilitating relationships among neighborhood groups, city officials, and developers. However, the best practices are designed for competitive engagement spaces, not collaborative ones that allow for a deeper understanding of diverging perspectives. The best practices focus on standardization and efficiency, which have been shown to create unwelcoming environments (Nabatchi and Leighninger 2015).

All parties involved, including the city department, liaisons, commissioners, developers, and neighbors, want more socially equitable engagement environments. Moulton and Sandfort (2017) make the point that achieving effective change when implementing a policy requires collective action between each strategic action field. When there is confusion, disagreement, and vagueness about the purpose of area commissions, dominant culture, identities, and practices will prevail, often at the expense of procedural equity. Taken together, we offer the following proposition:

Proposition 1: Lack of consensus on the purpose of public participation impacts social equity in public participation environments.

### ***The Relationship Between the Organizational and Policy Field***

In addition to the earlier stated purpose of the city’s best practices, another reason more likely to have been voiced by White liaisons was to increase professionalism and civility on the commissions. The concepts of professionalism and civility appeared to be implicitly related to city staff’s evaluations of whether commissions “are functional” and “do it well.” They are conversely related to emotion and conflict, which are often necessary for the expression of hurt, harm, and trauma (Hawn 2020). Commissions are not designed to facilitate dialogue about historic neighborhood trauma, but they are often the only formal venue where discussion about development can happen. Black neighborhood department liaisons focused less on civility and more on the importance of respect, community knowledge, and flexibility than their White counterparts.

Those commissions adopting the city’s best practices

could develop more legitimacy, credibility, or voice with the city and developers and gain favor as they adopt the dominant culture, but not all commissions have adopted these recommendations. The six commissions that have not adopted the best practices have proportionally greater numbers of Black residents and homeowners within their boundaries.

Many of these Black neighborhoods have different relationships with the city government because of the history of redlining, disinvestment, and urban renewal. Thus, while current city staff envision neighborhood commissions focusing on visions for the future, older commissioners appear to focus on righting the wrongs of yesterday. A commissioner said of their fellow Black residents and commissioners while referencing the impact of these policies:

There are people who have had to fight, like fight, to get the neighborhood invested in. They are the ones that have been demanding the city pay attention. They're the ones that have been trying to get just the basic investments that should be in neighborhoods. . . It's just many of my neighbors have been in a fight mode for so long that it's really hard to come out of it. There's a history of some really contentious arguments around development that are not as high-minded.

Newer commissioners, who perhaps lack an understanding and appreciation for neighborhood history, appear to have a future-oriented view of engagement.

Regardless of the history of each neighborhood, a theme in the interviews with commissioners, residents, and developers is the perception that the city listens to other parties more than themselves. Developers feel that the commissions have too much influence over projects. However, residents tended to describe the commissions as not having any influence, with decision-makers ignoring commission decisions. Several commissioners voiced feeling ineffective. The data derived from city bulletins on development decisions demonstrates that the city overwhelmingly sides with the recommendations of the commissions. Indeed, out of 605 city bulletins from over a decade, only eight times did a bulletin contain a recommendation where the recommendation of at least one decision-making body (e.g., neighborhood commission, development commission, city department) differed from those made by others. The city

bulletins do not include information on whether the vote was split on the commission.

Commissioners and residents also suggested that the city treats the commissions as a “rubber stamp” to channel the desires and interests of developers. These interviewees often justified this perception by referring to the fact that the city moved commission responsibilities from a department that makes land use decisions to a brand-new neighborhood’s department that does not. This department change muddied communication and lines of authority.

All of these conditions, combined with a near-universal desire for commissioners to have more engagement from residents, suggest that the engagement forums are not seen as relevant ways to serve neighborhoods or express concerns. As a result, we offer the following two propositions:

Proposition 2: Organizations engaging the public and the broader policy field must have a mutual understanding of past policy decisions that impacted the area to create socially equitable participation environments.

Proposition 3: Lack of trust between different scales of the policy system inhibits the ability for organizations to create socially equitable public participation environments.

### *The Driving Forces of Public Participation*

In this section, we present the findings around each of the forces (i.e., demand for services, culture, practices) across commissions and the citizen identities that interface with the commissions. We then describe each of the four cases and how these forces drive each participation environment.

#### DEMAND FOR SERVICES

The dynamics of the housing market are the primary driver for demands of neighborhood commission “services,” namely zoning decision-making and associated opportunities for public participation. Given our site selections, these neighborhood commissions are experiencing a lot of new investment, albeit some more than others. Three of the four commissions have changing demographics, as higher-income residents move in, but there are still census tracts with concentrated poverty in commission boundaries. Because the city’s zoning code has not been comprehensively reformed since the

1950s, nearly all new investments require some zoning changes or variances that must come before the commissions. In some commissions, this application starts with a planning committee before moving to the zoning committee and then onto the full commission. High application rates tax the capacity of area commissions. Intense market activity leads to an overwhelming focus on efficiency. Further, experimental research has shown that as frontline workloads increase, there is the potential for implicit bias and resulting discrimination (Andersen and Guul 2019).

The pressure on commissions to focus on applications and efficient practices may be mitigated through a comprehensive citywide zoning update, which is underway. However, for many commissions that use the city's best practices, the best practices may need to be changed as well. The presence of strict father engagement practices is not limited to the city's best practices. Indeed, one of the commissions adopted its own policy that uses a strict father approach. These policies are not always enforced, but they appear to be utilized when there is a clear lack of trust between commissioners, when leaders are protecting themselves, or when there is a contentious issue on the agenda. This means that in times of highly volatile decision-making, the commission may resort to strict father engagement practices that limit the opportunity for collaboration and mutual understanding.

#### CULTURE—BELIEFS AND VALUES

We documented indicators of both strict father and nurturing parent frames in each commission, and sometimes in the same commissioner. However, one dominant culture was identified for each commission through the combination of a few factors. Foremost, we noted the influence of the commission chair in many of the observations. According to the liaisons, the chairs play an outsized role in "setting the stage." Then there is the history, or path dependence, of how the commission has operated. When asked about strict father practices, one commissioner stated, "I think part of it is culture, part of it is like, 'Hey, don't come in here trying to change everything because that's not how it works.'" Finally, another factor is the relationship between commission leaders and the city decision-makers and developer networks. A close relationship between commission leadership and the city and developer net-

works could lead to an environment that engenders a strict father culture.

#### PRACTICES

The area commissions exhibited a wide range of practices during our observations. Frequent strict father practices included firm adherence to a predetermined engagement practice/style with little or no space for participants to innovate or voice criticism of practices; strict adherence to dominant structures versus allowing for community volatility and legitimacy; practices encouraging participants with differing views to engage in competitive processes for resources; an emphasis on efficiency in terms of engagement opportunities; and sublimation of emotional/historical/spiritual forms of knowledge within practices. Efficiency and competition would likely benefit those already in power. When dissent is brought up, it is often chalked up to someone being "emotional," with some commissioners accusing other commissioners of voting "emotionally." This was described so prolifically throughout the interviews that it is difficult to discern if there are indeed instances where this is the case or if many commissioners perceive those who disagree with them as being emotional.

Frequent nurturing parent practices included promoting participant empowerment and learning relevant to participant needs through engagement; prioritizing building equitable reciprocal relationships between participants and administrators; connecting individual success to community success when tackling problems; seeking and accepting a variety of experiences, as well as knowledge that is derived from experiential and emotional sources; and recognizing and/or uplifting skills and abilities of participants. We observed fewer instances of the nurturing parent practices such as promoting participant empowerment and learning through engagement activities and specific instances of practices designed to illuminate structural inequities. Generally, these nurturing parent practices are more time-consuming to plan and enact than a strict father, and these nurturing parent practices counter dominant "best practices."

During our observation, we noted that practices can be thought of as either more people-oriented (which aligns more with the nurturing parent) or property-oriented (which aligns more with the strict father). For

**Table 2. Study Site Participation Environments—Elements of the Strategic Action Field (SAF) Framework**

Elements of the SAF Framework	Site 1. Lower growth mixed neighborhood	Site 2. Higher growth Black neighborhood	Site 3. Lower growth White neighborhood	Site 4. Higher growth mixed neighborhood
Purpose of the commission	Shared understanding of purpose (albeit different than the city)	Two distinct ideas of purpose	Neighborhood planning document states a shared vision, but interviews reveal two distinct ideas of purpose	Two distinct ideas of purpose
Policy field (city-commission relationship)	Lack of trust between the commission and city leadership	Lack of trust between the commission and city leadership	Leadership is well-networked with the city's development regime	Leadership is well-networked with the city's development regime
Demand for services	Lowest development pressure	Highest development pressure	Lower development pressure	Higher development pressure
Culture (beliefs and values)	Nurturing parent	Historically strict father leadership; new shift toward nurturing parent	Strict father contending with nurturing parent	Strict father
Laws and regulations	Does not use city's best practices	Does not use city's best practices; has its own strict father policy for engagement	Uses city's best practices; has its own neighborhood plan	Uses city's best practices
Practices	Nurturing parent dominates	Strict father dominates	Strict father dominates, but nurturing parent practices are present	Strict father dominates, but nurturing parent practices are present
Citizen identities	Nurturing parent leadership and target population identities	Strict father leadership with new shift toward nurturing parent identities; target population exhibits a mix of identities	Strict father leadership with some nurturing parents; target population exhibits a mix of identities	Strict father leadership with some nurturing parents; target population exhibits mostly strict father identities
Public participation environment	Most equitable	Historically least equitable	Some practices suggest greater social equity, but strict father dominates	Less equitable

example, one commission held a generative conversation when discussing affordable housing, recreation opportunities for “our kids,” and neighbor accessibility to healthcare, while another commission focused on the “fit” of an affordable housing project in the neighborhood and property values at meetings.

**CITIZEN IDENTITIES**

Commissioners, as both frontline actors and citizens themselves, took on citizen identities to claim power (“credentialing”) and legitimize their actions (Ray 2019). We also see these claims made by commission meeting attendees. Certain environmental conditions may privilege certain identities and ignore others, bringing a fluidity to identities. We observed the fol-

lowing characteristics related to strict father identities in meetings. When individuals took on the identity of a consumer, they favored market-based solutions to community challenges (e.g., business tax abatements) and public/private partnerships in proposals. When individuals took on the identity of a homeowner, they voiced concerns about property values and aesthetic decisions (e.g., neighborhood “fit,” curb appeal) in proposals. These identities play into such claims as where you live, who you know, or your expertise.

Nurturing parent identities we observed included those of advocate and neighbor. The advocate identity included attention to issues rooted in social justice concerns; calling out the presence of oppressive behavior within engagement dialogue and practice; noting in-

equitable impacts resulting from policies; and speaking specifically on behalf of marginalized communities. The neighbor identity favored processes and solutions that are community-derived and oriented toward sharing power.

#### EMERGENT PARTICIPATION ENVIRONMENTS

This subsection summarizes the four commissions we investigated more extensively to describe the emergent participation environments for each of the four commissions (Table 2). The elements of the SAF framework run along the left side of the table, and the four sites along the top with short descriptions are offered in the table. Additional propositions are offered for further study, reflecting what we learned across sites.

Many factors interact presenting what appears to be a more socially equitable public participation environment of the Lower Growth Mixed Neighborhood (Site 1) commission. The commissioners express a lack of trust with the city and have not adopted the city's best practices. Yet, the commissioners have a shared understanding of the purpose of their area commission, which includes an expanded role beyond supporting zoning decisions. The commissioners also have a united vision for the future of their neighborhood. Commissioners spoke highly of one another and their leadership, who supports a nurturing parent culture that impacts processes used in the participation environment. One commissioner described the decision-making process, which highlights nurturing parent collaborative practices:

And [the commission] has a tendency, I guess, to culminate in the best decision for a specific issue because we have different perspectives and we share our ideas, our thoughts. And then after we present everything out, we take a moment. And if there's anything that needs clarity, often the chairperson will ask questions or someone else on the commission will ask questions. That way, there is nothing that's foggy and then we make a decision based upon all the information that we've gathered. It's really a dynamite process.

The nurturing parent culture is also associated with people-oriented versus property-oriented practices and identities (neighbor and advocate). While both strict father and nurturing parent practices were exhibited, nurturing parent practices far outnumbered strict father

practices. This commission has the lowest development pressure of the commissions allowing for more time to focus on community issues, such as youth safety, recreation, or community events. Lower development pressure also means less change in demographics, which can lead to conflict.

The Higher Growth Black Neighborhood (Site 2) commission has a long-standing, tension-filled relationship with the city. Past racist policies, such as redlining and disinvestment, are likely the foundation for the historic lack of trust between the area commission and the city. Like Site 1, the commission does not use the city's best practices, yet, unlike Site 1, it has its own strict father policy governing engagement. There is not a shared understanding of the purpose of their commission. The commissioners can be broadly split into two different groups, both with a desire to serve the community, albeit in different ways. One group is older Black residents who seek reinvestment in their neighborhood, which appears to be connected to "righting past wrongs" of disinvestment related to redlining and highway development. Strict father approaches are utilized by the chair, who is part of this group, to control dissent around new developments. Strict father practices related to efficiency are reinforced by intense development pressure.

The other group tends to be made up of younger, White residents who see the commission as a way to build community through neighbor engagement. This group has made suggestions to include more nurturing parent practices, yet their disconnection to the history of neighborhood marginalization likely creates barriers to greater social equity. For example, this group does not appear to appreciate that control of the direction of development is paramount for Black commissioners who have historically been denied control. While newer commissioners intend to change practices, there does not appear to be a process in place to facilitate a conversation about the reasons for differences between the groups, which reinforces divides and a hostile participation environment.

The Lower Growth White Neighborhood (Site 3) commission appears to have a functional working relationship with the city, and the commission leadership is closely networked into the city's development regime. This commission uses the city's best practices. In addition, the commission has its own planning document that illustrates a shared vision for the future of the neighborhood, yet commissioners hold two differ-

ent ideas of the commission's purpose. The dominant group's purpose is narrower, seeing the commission as a facilitator between the neighborhood and the city to attract development. The less dominant (and smaller) group envisions the commission addressing social justice issues, such as homelessness and gentrification. (Just prior to, and during our study, commissioners in this second group left the commission.) The tension is compounded by the fact that the commissioners do not seem to trust one another and do not address sources of conflict. As one commissioner said about not addressing the source of conflicts,

I think a lot of the conflicts are things like that, where it's not about this specific development necessarily, it's about what that development represents and what it says about our neighborhood and what it says about what is allowed and not allowed, who belongs, who doesn't belong, what is good, what is not. And so we end up fighting about the development, but the larger ideology and values go.

During our observations, the commission used more nurturing parent practices, but strict father practices are supported by leadership and the city's liaison, creating tensions that were noted by developers and residents that we interviewed. Given the nurturing parent practices, these tensions were often given space in meetings to be discussed, which may be enabled by the lower level of development pressure (and less crowded agendas). Despite this, the overall area commission's strict father approach did not change.

In many ways the Higher Growth Mixed Neighborhood (Site 4) commission is like Site 3, but with a higher level of development pressure. This commission also appears to have a functional working relationship with the city, the commission leadership is closely networked into the city's development regime, and the commission uses the city's best practices.

Like the two previous commissions, it has at least two factions with differing conceptualizations of the purpose of area commissions. One faction is embedded in networks of civic associations, which are predominantly made up of White, affluent homeowners. It leans more toward a strict father set of identities and practices. The chair is in this group, who was cited in every interview as influencing the culture of the commission. Therefore, it follows that this commission adopted the

city's best practices. Commissioners in the other faction tend to exhibit nurturing parent identities and practices, and they have relationships with nonprofits that serve lower-income and more diverse populations. A few commissioners from this group left the commission during the time of our study.

In one meeting in which a highly contentious development proposal was being voted on, the two factions voted in opposition to each other on nearly every development vote, with the civic association network faction carrying one more vote than the nonprofit network faction. This difference is important as the commission was meeting online. Because one Black commissioner's technology was not working, they never got to vote on any of the proposals. The de facto reliance on strict father practice resulted in the lack of a vote and potentially changed the outcome of these land-use decisions.

This set of findings and discussion brings us to offer four more propositions:

Proposition 4: Social equity in public participation environments are emergent properties of strategic action fields composed of the following drivers: demand for services, culture, practices, and laws.

Proposition 5: Dominant culture and time pressure (as a result of demand for services) are major drivers of practice and policy in public participation environments:

5a: Dominant culture sets the norms for practice.

5b: Intense demand for services causes time stress in the participation environment, leading to an overwhelming focus on strict father practices.

Proposition 6: Nurturing parent culture, practices, and laws enable more equitable participation environments.

Proposition 7: Citizen identities and claims for legitimacy, and acceptance of these claims, respond to the dominant public participation environment culture.

## Conclusion

Public participation has long suffered from social inequities (Arnstein 1969; Holley 2016; Quick and Feldman 2011). Public administrators have a role in creating

and managing public forums within which the public interacts (Nabatchi and Leighninger 2015), producing environments that can either support or inhibit socially equitable participation. These environments are the result of a complex set of interactions within public sector organizations, between public sector organizations, citizens, and other institutions, and across scales in the policy field. As such, we use Moulton and Sandfort's (2017) Strategic Action Field Framework for Implementation Research as the theoretical foundation to study social equity in public participation environments. The SAF framework centers public service delivery, in this case, public participation, theorizing how collective action connected across many levels is impacted by drivers of stability and change (i.e., demand for services, culture, practices, and laws and regulations).

We apply this framework to a multisite case of neighborhood commissions, a typical form of citizen engagement by local governments. The case allows us to illustrate the interaction of two different aspects of what should be a public administrator's commitment to social equity (Guy and McCandless 2012). One aspect is for public administrators to provide a "guarantee of a place at the table" (Guy and McCandless 2012, 12). Currently, the law establishing neighborhood commissions grounds this aspect of social equity. Yet that law, and associated policies, do not dictate the creation of environments that attend to a second aspect of social equity, procedural equity. Participation environments must also provide the necessary conditions so that participants are included in the process and can express themselves on matters important to them.

Our findings on social equity in participation environments are interpreted using the two predominant cultural frames from the U.S. civic arena, the "strict father" and the "nurturing parent." In summary, the dominant culture in an organization shapes the environment for participation via the establishment of norms, policies, and practices, as well as setting preferences for certain citizen identities. In our case, the strict father cultural lens predominated. It is reinforced when intense demand for public participation and as-

sociated time stress leads to an overwhelming focus on strict father practices, such as rigid rules, efficiency, and competitive practices, all of which impede procedural equity. The strict father focuses more on property and efficiency, favoring citizen identities of landowner and consumer, while the nurturing parent focuses more on people and collaboration, favoring identities of neighbor and advocate. Nurturing parent culture, practices, and laws enables more equitable processes in participation environments. Finally, we contend that to realize socially equitable participation environments, nurturing parent norms, practices, and policies must be coupled with a consensus on the purpose of participation, a mutual understanding of the impact of past discriminatory policies, and trust between different levels of the policy field.

The main limitation of this research is also a central opportunity to further its line of theoretical thinking: Namely, we did not examine the equity of outcomes. A testing of the propositions against outcomes is the next step. Another potential limitation is that we use a multisite case of land use decision-making in one U.S. city. However, given that the analytical framework is theory-based, and the setting is a common one in terms of local government-citizen interaction, there is likely utility in other formal settings in which administrators seek input from residents.

In addition to testing our seven propositions against outcomes, as mentioned above, future research could include examining our propositions with other social groups and other settings. For example, we focus on social equity mostly in terms of racialized groups, yet it is known that public participation environments are inequitable for other groups, such as youth (Botchwey et al. 2019), communities navigating trauma (Reece 2020), and people with disabilities (Ho et al. 2020). Further, we examine the social equity of public participation in a large midwestern city. Therefore, exploring social equity in suburban, exurban, and rural communities that likely have different structures and organizations in the public participation policy field would provide further evidence for the trustworthiness of the framework and findings.

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