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(Lakhdar Brahimi, Fall 2002)

Exploring Urban Practice in a Democratizing Society:
Opportunities, Techniques, and Challenges

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This essay presents a revision of the 2005 Rusty Bernstein Memorial Lecture, given by the author at the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg on September 1, 2005. Too often, theories of planning and governance neglect careful accounts of the daily challenges of the actual work of planners, policy analysts, and public administrators more broadly. In South Africa's remarkable period of transition, planners and public servants have faced and continue to respond to striking and historically unprecedented challenges. Drawing upon more than a decade of experience gathering and exploring largely North American and European "practice stories," this essay offers an approach and a method that South African students, researchers, and scholars might appropriate critically for their own ends—as they might work to explore both the challenges and the opportunities faced by South African practitioners in this unique period of transition.

So this essay reflects the spirit, too, of a Berkeley professor who asked us as his students to appreciate the "instructive mistakes" of what we read. Offering its share of instructive mistakes,

this seeks to honor not just the ideological but, even more, the practical example that Rusty Bernstein, co-drafter of the Freedom Charter, set for advocates of social and political justice.

The purpose of this essay, then, is not to describe or assess North American planning practice, but to ask, and to have readers ask with me, how we can explore engaged and ambitious South African "planning" practice in new ways—learning not only from the histories that appear in the texts of outstanding authors, but learning from the histories that have been written in the sweat and struggles, in the deftness and the deeds, of community planners and organizers, community builders, urban designers and urban activists alike, all seeking a world more free of injustice, a world more full of hope and real possibility.

This essay will argue that we need to listen more carefully than we have to the activist practitioners whose work we wish to honor and from which we hope to learn. We need to appreciate far more than their intentions, their rosy and righteous goals, their party lines. We need to appreciate where they have been stuck and how they adapted; where they have been surprised and what they learned; where their training served them well and poorly; where their insights gained through difficult experience might suggest more lasting lessons for practice. In a practical world always structured by complex relations of power, always posing questions of ethical perception in daily work, this essay argues that by doing careful, critically probing studies of practitioners—practitioners facing the crucial issues of our day, local and global, environmental and economic, interethnic and political—we will find that not only can we come to see the work of planning and design in fresh ways, not only can we learn about new opportunities to seize practically, but we will discover how better to teach planning and architecture as well (Slack 2003, Sherman 2005; Watson 2002).

The argument proceeds in three parts. The first part poses the challenges of doing justice to difficult and astute work that community planners and urban designers, community organizers and housing activists, for example, may really do as they work in-between diverse and conflicting stakeholders (Forester 1989, 2006; Sandercock 2003). The second part summarizes several techniques and approaches, even tricks of the trade, that might help students of the micro-politics of community planning and action to explore carefully what these engaged practitioners not only face, but can accomplish. Finally, the third part seeks to build upon the first two to clarify opportunities to analyze and learn from—and perhaps to improve—South African planning and design practices. Throughout we consider quotations from practicing planners, architects, and mediators of public disputes to illuminate relevant themes we hope to explore.

If we care to listen, planning and design practitioners can say some remarkably interesting things. Consider a few simple examples. Here's an architect recollecting how he watched hospital staff in urban Philadelphia work on a plastic model of the new facility they'd asked him to design. He says,

The more they started talking about their problems with how they put those chips on the model, the more I realized they were negotiating among themselves for solutions right then and there. They were the staff of the hospital—and I said to myself, "If they're negotiating, then what the heck am I doing?"—and then I realized, "I'm facilitating—I'm not designing the hospital yet—I'm mediating their attempts to solve their problems." (Sherman 2005)

Here in a few words we have a young professional's self-discovery and an "Aha!" recognition of a facilitative, deliberative way of practicing architecture: a new way for him to think about how he himself could be more effective than he had previously imagined!

Listen to a planner-mediator working in Canada to solve boundary and border disputes of adjoining municipalities:

The relationship building is critical. It really is. . . .

One administrator . . . all of a sudden said to me, “Until I realized that I could divorce my wife easier than I could divorce my municipal neighbor, things weren’t going that well. But when I realized that I had to have an ongoing relationship, all of a sudden the incentive to negotiate with the other side was there.” (Diepeveen 2004)

So here's a city administrator discovering the wisdom and the immense practicality of interdependence—perhaps a form of what South Africans call "ubuntu"—and the pressing need, then, to pay close attention to relationships no less than to the substantive issues at hand.

Or listen. once more, to an urban planner working with a Hate Crimes Commission in the wake of urban murders:

In a situation where there’s so much pain because people have experienced the racism or the deaths of friends or family, it is a highly emotionally charged environment. People are so sensitive to the touch. And you could have the same type of polarized debates, so that some are saying, “The problem is that we have single mothers that don’t watch over their kids, and that’s why we have this problem,” and, on the other hand, people will say, “It’s poverty that’s causing this, not single parent families.”

I was anticipating all of this from within the commission itself. . . ." (Umemoto 2004)

Here in her four sentences we can already begin to see, through the window of her practice, planning-relevant history, pain, racism, emotion, polarization, perspective and debate, and more too—crucially, her own working anticipation of what she was about to face practically as she struggled to work with the Hate Crimes Commission itself.

Now of course, we want to know more about the context of quotes like these, but that's part of the point. We hear, even in a few lines, echoes of significant problems and themes that we face in our own ways in our own contexts—the fluid relationships of experts with clients, the recognition of our interdependence and our needs to negotiate relationships, the legacies of racism and pain all too alive today, the practicalities of anticipating each new meeting and who'll do what—and so we might in each distinctive context well wonder, "How can we learn from other thoughtful, skillful, experienced people who've handled similar problems to those we now face too?"

Even if we know enough not to expect gimmicks or simple technical fixes, we might well look for clues, ideas or strategies that we can translate, adapt, or appropriate critically in our own settings. But more importantly: only by examining closely real efforts in real places—and not just activists' and planners' "intentions" or "goals" in those places—will any of us know what our own contexts really involve, what they limit or actually allow. We can learn about the openings and constraints of the real contexts of our practice, too, not by asking if a planner or activist has been seeking "justice," for example, but by asking in detail how they may have been doing that (or seeking local autonomy, or empowerment, or decentralization, and so on).

So studying practice in the face of complex relations of power, political loyalties, ethnic, religious and territorial identities (and more) must reach far beyond taking anyone's intentions at face value: it must reach to the micro-political details of planning practices (Forester 1999). But how can we do fieldwork to begin to learn about those fine-grained perceptions and moves,

hunches and judgments, those "how's" of such engaged work? We will review in what follows several of the practical "tricks of the trade" that the author has learned from a dozen years of examining planners,' architects' and, more recently, mediators' "practice stories" in the U.S., Europe, and Australia. None of these suggestions, of course, should be applied uncritically: these are practical tips to be interpreted and translated and adapted—or discarded.

But first we must consider four challenges that threaten to obstruct virtually any probing, critical (power-sensitive, ethically self-reflexive) analysis of urban planning and design practices. These problems grow from traditions of thought that reduce politics to exchange, objectivity to quantification, representation to abstraction, and ethics to mere prescription. In all these ways weak theory can hamper our study of how planners and activists work, for better or worse, in the face of (and with) power. We can call these challenges:

- i. The Problem of Moral Resonance: Doing Narrative Justice In Ways We Write;
- ii. The Problem of Being Practical: Recognize Situated Stories as Revelatory
- iii. The Problem of Complexity and Pain: Needing Not Labels, But to Look and See!
- iv. The Problem of Ethics: Learning About Value

Part One: Challenges Facing Those Wishing to Study Practice

i. The Problem of Moral Resonance: Looking Far Beyond Instrumental Technique

The first challenge, then, confronts us with the task of removing the blinders and the emotional tone-deafness of much of conventional social science. In a famous essay, Hannah Arendt suggested that a political "science" description that reduced the concentration camps to the apparently essential quantitative numbers of those shipped, stripped, gassed, and cremated would

be far less scientific than obscene and barbarous (Benhabib 1990, Tobias 1999). She took an extreme case to make a far less extreme point: we all know when words fail us, when after a loss we have been deeply moved and someone else's glib, "Too bad!" really doesn't seem to capture it; we all know when a friend or co-worker or neighbor has lost a loved one and we search for words and action—for words not to dismiss, not to reduce, not to slight, not to condescend, but for words and action to acknowledge, respect, console or comfort, perhaps to recognize, to do justice to, and in some small way to be present with them in their grief.

In a stunning passage developing Arendt's argument, Seyla Benhabib (1990) writes,

The moral resonance of one's language does not primarily reside in the explicit value judgments which an author may pass on the subject matter; rather such resonance must be an aspect of the narrative itself. The language of narration must match the moral quality of the narrated object.

So Arendt presents us with a challenge of doing narrative justice in the ways we write: doing critical analyses in languages that match the moral quality of community members' real lives and experiences, their lived pasts and real possible futures. Here, South Africa has a great deal to teach the rest of the world: how to inquire carefully and give voice and word, testimony and commentary appropriate not only to wrenching situations of massive oppression and poverty, but also to diverse and imaginative urban practices as they struggle critically to reconstruct a new South African future (Tobias 1999, Minow 1999; Moodley 2004; Slack 2003).

Conventional social science may have precious little to offer here, but morally nuanced and morally realistic work might be more helpful: narrative and interpretive work that is morally nuanced because it struggles to do justice to the suffering no less than to the hopes and imaginations of the South African people; work that is morally realistic because it does not run

from exposing the many truths of the viciousness of racism, it does not run from debunking the falsehoods of fatuous, self-promoting ideologues (Tobias 1999; Krog 1998). Of course, the realm of the moral here is no more reducible to "codes" or rules than politics can be reduced to ballots or votes. As politics involves contingencies of freedom, connectedness and possible domination, the moral involves contingencies of good, care and possible exploitation. So we need, as I will argue next, to take people's stories—and now not least of all either, South African practitioners' stories—far more seriously, more critically, and less literally than we have, not simply and dismissively as subjective or worse, as navel-gazing, but as disclosing nuanced claims and offers, acts and strategies—as deeply illuminating, even revelatory, windows onto the political and moral worlds of South African practices (Forester 1999, 2003; cf. Huxley and Yiftachel 2000).

ii. The Problem of The Practical: Recognize Situated Stories as Revelatory

The second challenge, a cousin of the first, faces the left as well as the right, designers as well as planners, indeed all the applied fields doing practical work in the shadow of more established, apparently rigorous and "scientific" mother disciplines. The problem is this: if we learn to think about "knowledge" as merely "scientific," we might well be right, but not right enough. We will be thinking of knowledge along the lines of engineering structures, "How much load will a beam of this size and shape support?" but we will be forgetting about knowledge along the lines of "knowing how to ride a bicycle," for example, or "knowing how to cook," or "knowing how to be kind" or "knowing how to listen" (and to plan with affected people to reconstruct the future).

The second challenge, then, goes beyond our not confusing these two kinds of knowledge—generalized, testable propositions and embodied practical judgments—to our recognizing that in fields of practical activity (improving urban planning in many of our communities, for example!),

we're likely to learn less from recipes or general rules for all times and places, and more from vivid examples of real work, exemplars of sensitive and astute practical-contextual judgment in families of messy and complex cases. Here we need not abstract lists of "what worked," but specific stories of reconstructive action—not so much experimental results but experimental stories, not so much or only abstract rules (or principles alone) about 'what to do' but emotionally rich, morally entangled, contextually specified stories about "how they really did it" (Cf. Forester 1999; Flyvbjerg 2001; Nussbaum 1990;

iii. The Problem of Complexity and Pain: Needing Not Labels, But to Look and See!

The third challenge, like the first two, also confronts us with the dangers of our own over-abstraction. We are so quick to label that we become captured by our own shorthand, and the more powerfully evocative those labels—"racism," "power," "participation," "resistance"—the more difficult, not the easier, it becomes to understand these issues in new and more insightful ways—and the still more difficult it becomes to learn how to act constructively, re-constructively, to do better. We need to rediscover, as if for the first time, power less and analyze power far more than we do. Surely now we know that relations of power are pervasive, ever-present, so we need to turn more now not just to acknowledge its existence but to figure out how to resist, employ, and build power in the particular cases that concern us. We must begin—not end—critical analyses by assessing power relations, and we need to go forward from there: otherwise we risk reducing critique to complaint, critical analysis of real possibility to re-describing what we already know.

Our challenge here is to learn through the friction of actual practice—to learn through the eyes and ears and hopes and dreads and difficulties and surprises of actual people, activists and ordinary—and often extraordinary—people who get up each morning and confront in messy detail

the fears and distrust and scheming and self-interest and aggression of others that our abstractions otherwise so thinly render.

Sensitive to a similar danger of concepts too easily used as "pictures that hold us captive," the philosopher Wittgenstein implored those who wanted to learn about such concepts to "Look and see!" He was telling us not to think any less, but to do better fieldwork (cf. Austin 1970), to observe more carefully. A community development worker put this need to move beyond abstraction this way recently as he described local conflicts: "There's always more going on; there's always something extra" (Grenot 2005). Diplomat Lakhdar Brahimi put our problem in the context of mediators' practice this way: "It's not enough to say that the people are stupid or cruel or corrupt. There's more than that going on, and your job as a mediator is to find out what more is going on..." (Lakhdar Brahimi, 2002).

The Deliberative Practitioner describes this orientation as "a bias for practice": a countermovement against too quickly defined problems and over-abstract summaries, a willingness to examine difficult situations of practice to see if in considering them, we can learn not only more about "racism" and "power" and "resistance," but more too about what it humanly takes as a matter of real work, actual performance, to do—in a diverse range of settings—what we think ought to be done (Forester 1999).

iv. The Problem of Ethics and Value, What's "Exemplary"? Learning About Value

The fourth challenge picks up where the third left us, "Well, what ought to be done?" Notice the temptation, now, to fall into the trap I've just discussed, to give an abstract, general, contextually-independent answer or codified guideline, whether it's "Organize the community!" or "Seek justice by including all the stakeholders!" or "Design by incorporating the difficulties of the

site." These are each vaguely understandable, but perhaps only vaguely helpful. We are trying to learn, after all, not only to espouse critical principles, but to put them into practice—to learn not only to talk the talk, but to walk the walk.

Our challenge here is not to come up with pithy, prescriptive rules or codes about what to do but to examine closely what we have just referred to as others' "emotionally rich, morally entangled, contextually specified stories about 'how they really did it'" —their fine-grained, historically-situated, experientially vivid accounts of thoughtful, sensitive, politically astute work in the kinds of planning and governance settings that we—you—wish to explore.

So we should recognize the question of ethics, "What ought to be done?" as a bit of a tease. Why? Because so much ought to be done in the often politicized, conflict-ridden, and socially fraught contexts in which planners, activists and designers work that abstract answers of principle must just be first, not last, words: statements of goals should not be substitutes for further steps toward implementation.

Recognizing that no simple ethical rules will do—to "meet housing needs," for example—recognizing that skillful practitioners of good judgment must bring a wide range of considerations and perceptions to bear, gives us more practical ways to begin to study more and less effective practice. We can give up our narrow, reductive search for simple ethical prescriptions, and we can widen our ethical search. We can begin to understand that to learn about good planning, design, or organizing practice, to honor and appreciate astute and effective practice, to try to gather compelling and instructive models and examples, exemplars, of good practice at local or national scales, we will need to keep our eyes open not just for abstract rules, not just for benefit-cost techniques, not just for good intentions, but also for vivid, politically and instructively entangled examples. We need to look for powerful practical stories of paying respect, providing recognition,

listening as much to what's not said as to what is, responding sensitively in diverse and trying situations, appreciating that emotions are sources of knowledge and connection and not simply distractions, empowering community action, serving the underserved interests, and much, much more (see, e.g. Krumholz and Forester 1990).

So, far from reducing ethical knowledge to simple rules, codes or espoused intentions, we must try to look closely at practice—whether in neighborhoods or in international policy negotiations—to listen closely and critically, to ask about a much wider range of morally relevant considerations and actions than much in our conventional planning and design literature prepares us to do (cf. Sandercock 2003; Hiller 2002).

Part Two: Practical Strategies For The Collection and Analysis of Practice Stories

To meet these challenges, we need to resist the temptation to look for abstracted, pithy labels, keys, instrumental solutions—and we have to get closer, to do more justice, to the stresses, dangers, risks, and opportunities of real work. So let us turn now to explore the ways we can begin to do this. Along the way, we will not just recover part of the riches of our varied oral traditions, but we might learn about better ways to teach in the fields of community planning and governance as well (Portelli 1991; Slack 2003).

For fifteen years or so, an ad-hoc research group at Cornell has been collecting "practice stories" from urban and regional planners—community planners and urban designers, land use and environmental planners, historic preservationists and participatory action researchers, and others—and, in the last five years or so, we have focused upon the work of mediators—those people foolhardy enough to try to resolve public disputes after walking into rooms full of angry, contentious parties who have painful histories of no trust, less confidence, and still less affection

for each other. We have been interested particularly in the stories of these "mediators" or "facilitators," because their work provides striking lessons for any planner, public official or designer interested in forms of community involvement, "participation" and coalition-building, from neighborhood to much larger, metropolitan, regional, or national scales.

As we have done this work, a series of practical lessons for applied research has emerged (Forester, Peters and Hittleman 2005). These lessons provide no recipes for all times and places, but practical guidelines for examining the richness of practice, guidelines that others might adapt to their own contexts. So here Part Two presents a short course that reflects what we have learned about carefully gathering richly revealing, instructive stories of planners' and activists' work. Part Three, then, turns to themes that can help us to analyze these accounts. Throughout, none of what follows relates any more to dispute-resolution mediators than to community planners, no more to environmental planners than to housing activists: our concern is how to encourage diverse practitioners to give richly detailed accounts of their struggles, their actual work.

So, for those interested in examining, analyzing and telling the stories of what skillful and engaged South African planners or designers, organizers or community activists have been doing, these eight practical guidelines may be suggestive at least:

- i. Choose Actors, Not Spectators, Intimately Engaged With a Problem That You Find Crucial, Fascinating, and Compelling
- ii. Ask Those Actors to Tell the Stories of Instructive Cases Revealing Both Challenges and Opportunities;
- iii. Don't Ask the Actors, "What did you think about X?" Ask "How did you handle X?"
- iv. Get the Actor's Story with a Trajectory

v. Help the Actors Help Us: Ask For Relevant Details, Not Good Intentions; Ask for Examples, Not Abstractions

vi. Ask For Practical Implications

vii. Allow Time for Reflections and "Lessons Learned"

viii. Give "Reflection" Content by Mining the Riches of Surprise

Consider each in turn:

i. Choose Actors, Not Spectators, Intimately Engaged With a Problem That You Find Crucial, Fascinating, and Compelling

First, because we wish to work with "practice stories" that will give us "windows onto the world" of urban practice, we need, crucially, to choose experienced practitioners engaged in settings that interest us. Each word matters here. We need to identify thoughtful, experienced practitioners who have not only thought about working in the face of racism or distrust or community conflict or tribal rivalries or sexism, but who have done it, waking up each day and struggling with the kinds of issues whose engagement we want to learn about. We are looking for experienced actors, not spectators. We're looking not for the football fan twenty rows up in the stadium to get to know what he or she thinks; we're looking for the muscular, shrewd player on the field who can begin to tell us how he or she moves when this or that happens, when he or she sees whatever cues and clues he or she finds significant in the game. So we're after insiders, actors who can speak about their own moves (not just motives) within the conflict, not spectators who can only speak about what others seem actually to do from afar.

ii. Ask Those Actors to Tell the Stories of Instructive Cases Revealing Both Challenges and Opportunities

Second, choosing engaged actors, then, we can ask those planners, designers, activists—those real players—to choose an "instructive" case or project or issue that they have worked on that reflects well, in their judgment, both "the challenges and the opportunities" they've faced in their work. Here we try to build directly upon the practical experience, street wisdom and judgment of the actor who's been in the thick of things. If we can get a story of a case that they've found fascinating, given all their work, we're very likely to find fascinating and important elements in it too. But notice that we've said nothing about asking for success stories or for failures: we need only ask for stories that these practitioners estimate to be "instructive" in some ways and that reveal both the "challenges" and "opportunities" of their work.

Let's take a quick example. Here's a facilitator in the Pacific Northwest, 60 miles north of Seattle, Shirley Solomon—born in Durban, South Africa—who's convened local government officials and Native American tribal members to discuss land use planning, environmental protection and sustainability, and economic development. She tells us first about a technique that she thought would work well but did not, and then she tells us how she improvised in response. She says:

The role-play just was not the right technique to use because all these people are very much engaged in these issues, and it's passionate for them. They learned not at all from having to take the other's role: for instance, the tribal general manager was asked to be a developer. He just didn't want to be a developer, you know? So he tried to do it for a while, and then just got aggravated with it—and

one of the tribal leaders never got it, couldn't get into it, and just couldn't believe he wasn't able to represent who he was himself.

Here she immediately continues with her thought about what might have helped:

Maybe if it had been outlined in a way that they could have seen where they were going with it, it could have [encouraged some perspective taking and appreciating the other's positions, but] it just didn't get there.

But she goes on to tell us what she did next to respond to the group's reluctance to do any role taking:

[So, then we switched gears and moved it to them talking from their hearts, from where they really were at]. We started to really get to some of the things that they felt they should be doing together. What we wound up doing was still talking about the river, but talking about it from people's experience with specific issues they wanted to think about—talking about the river from their perspective.

From there it got bigger. What they wound up doing was exactly what we had hoped they would do, and that was to start bringing it down to the ground: What opportunities were there to be more collaborative? What were the specific things that they needed to begin to work on, because not only were there opportunities there, but things that could really cause great difficulty if they did not come together.

Here Solomon takes us from imaginative role-taking to "talking from their hearts," "people's experience with specific issues . . . about the river," to questions about "what opportunities were there to be more collaborative?"—and she stresses for us that this was not about any idealization

of cooperation but about the real recognition of danger: "because not only were there opportunities . . . but things that could really cause great difficulty if they did not come together."

By asking for "instructive" stories, we subtly ask for accounts that these practitioners judge to have value for others interested in similar issues. By asking for stories that reflect the "challenges" of their work, we ask them to set the stage historically, politically, socially, even psychologically; we want to know in detail what they are up against, what makes their work formidable, daunting, difficult, complex, uncertain, perhaps frightening, perhaps dangerous.

Not least of all, and indeed crucially in our fields, by asking for engaged practice stories that reflect the "opportunities" of their work, we are keeping alive a space of transformative politics; we are protecting against cynicism, presumption, and our own easy answers, protecting a space for experienced, thoughtful practitioners to reflect upon what they can really do in practice, as they try to help us see possibilities too (again, whether they're working on international or local issues). Here we're not asking about abstract ideals or intentions, but about concrete efforts: challenges as well as opportunities.

So we're trying to carry out—if you want a theoretical label or two—a "critical phenomenology," or better, a "critical pragmatism": "critical" because we're concerned about power, challenges and resistance and possibilities; a "pragmatism" because we're trying to learn from the friction of real practice in various fields. We're seeking—in more ordinary language—to perch on the shoulders, or look through the eyes, or share the emotional sensitivity and political imagination, of living and breathing (and stressed and struggling) actors who have not only faced similar obstacles to those we'd like to overcome, but who have also found opportunities for good work, opportunities that we'd like to seize too.

iii. Don't Ask the Actors, "What do you think about X?" Ask instead, "How did you handle X?"

Third, then, in our years of interviewing, we have discovered one most important lesson (and one most important trap). If we wish to learn about practice, about engagement, about tactics and strategy, about practical judgment, about sensitive and careful and nuanced and risk-taking efforts, we have to be careful not to sidetrack ourselves. Our most important lesson for success in these interviews goes like this: "Do not ask, "What did you think about [e.g., the pressure from the Mayor]?" but instead ask, "How did you handle [the pressure from the Mayor]?"

This sounds so simple, but it has stunning effects. Asking what someone thinks about the political pressure from the Mayor, we'll get their views of local politics, their theories or speculations about the party in power, and so on—which for other purposes might be fine—but we won't find out about their practice. Asking about what someone's done about the pressure from the Mayor, how they handled it, how they responded to it, how they dealt with it, we'll get a story about what they tried to do, perhaps anticipating the Mayor's pressure, perhaps only responding to it, but in any case, we'll be far more likely to get an insider's story of practice, not a more detached set of observations about local politics.

So our best practical advice for collecting practice stories: ask again and again action-oriented, "How did you?" questions, "How did you handle X; How did you respond to Y? What did you do about Z?"—and we'll hear in turn, "Well, because I knew A, B, and C, I did this and this, but then we were blindsided by Y and Z"—and then we'll have a rich practice story to assess (we'll learn about the possible roles of A, B, C, Y and Z), not just reflecting their general beliefs but what they took into account and what they didn't, what practical considerations they made as they acted.

iv. Get the Actor's Story with a Trajectory

Fourth, we need to get a story that has a beginning, middle, and end, a story that has enough complexity and messiness, enough conflict and passion and drama, to provide rich material for careful analysis. We asked a very talented mediator in Washington, D.C. once about a case she worked on, and it turned out that she was in the middle of it, so after twenty minutes, all the answers to her questions seemed to be, "I don't know; we haven't come to that meeting yet," and our interview went up in smoke.

So since that instructive disaster, ten years ago, we've always asked for cases or projects that had both some identifiable beginning, at least for the practitioner's involvement, and some closure or partial (if on-going) outcome. Roughly speaking, we're trying to fill in a trajectory that leads from the answer to "How did you get involved (in this issue or case)?" to "What kind of outcome were you able to achieve?" So, if in the first few minutes of the interview we can mark the practitioner's beginning involvement and a tentative outcome, too, then we can spend a good three-quarters of the interview exploring, "So how did you get there? What did you do? How did you handle [the various challenges and pitfalls we're interested in exploring in such cases]?"

v. Help The Actors Help Us: Ask For Relevant Details, Not Good Intentions; Ask for Examples, Not Abstractions

Fifth, if it's not already obvious, these practice-focused interviews are guided conversations, they are not one-way monologues in which the interviewers sit passively and listen. Quite the contrary: our job as analysts of practice is to help our interviewees tell richly revealing, politically complex, socially nuanced stories of their practical work, the tough parts and the satisfying parts, the walls they run into and the opportunities they find they can seize. This means that the

interviewers not only co-construct the interview conversations, but the interviewers must bring analytically informed questions to explore.

Now, this point alone could take a university course in itself to elaborate, but consider one simple analogy. If I wanted to explore the ways planners could deal with "power" in municipalities, I would try to do far better than to ask a local planner the flat-footed question, 'So, Smith, how did you handle "power" in your particular case?' This question would most likely just prompt, "Well, what do you mean, 'power'?" — as it should!

So consider this analogy. If you wanted to learn about what "good parenting" involved, practically speaking, in a particular culture, for example, and you could speak with a set of parents in that culture, you might not do very well if you asked, "Well, good day, Mr. and Mrs. Smith, could you tell me if you are good parents?"

What's wrong here? Let's leave aside the Smith's defensiveness and perhaps fear of your intrusiveness. What you're likely to get here is some combination of Mr. and Mrs. Smith's good intentions, "Well, we try to do this and this...." and Mr. and Mrs. Smith's interpretation or their guess about what you mean by being "good parents." But that's hardly what you've wanted, which was instead to learn about the practical challenges and opportunities of good parenting, whatever you might learn and discover that to mean.

So as interviewers, to stay with the Smiths for one more minute, we would need, well before ever meeting the Smiths and the Joneses next door, to have done our analytic homework to think about what in the world we suspect that good parenting might involve—to think about what, behind the abstraction of "good parenting," we're really concerned with! — so that we might then ask far more specific questions about the relevant details ("How do you spend time with your children; what kinds of things do you do?") — so that, in turn, we might really learn about the

challenges of good parenting—and not simply about the Smiths' good intentions or what they make of our abstractions!

The same applies to our interviews of practitioners. If we want to learn about dealing with inequalities and power differences, we have to ask more specific, less naive questions than, "How do you deal with inequalities?" We have to help our interviewees help us, not by manipulating or leading them, not by putting words in their mouths, but by helping them to teach us about specifically relevant details of their work, not by getting them lost in our academic abstractions and jargon.

vi. Ask For Practical Implications

Sixth, then, as just hinted, we need as skillful interviewers to ask for specifics, for practical meaning, for implications and significance. If you have asked your interviewee how she handled a difficult encounter, and she has told you, "It was all a matter of respect," (or perhaps all a matter of "power" or of "being focused"), you can be sure that if you have just gone on to the next question, you will be kicking yourself when you read, on your transcription, "It was all a matter of respect"—for what in the world did she mean? What in the world does "respect" signify in her context and practice? Here's been a fabulous opportunity for us to learn about the actual complex practice of respect, and we've left it hidden behind a vague label—as any experienced interviewer has unfortunately also done, and will still wince about, remembering when.

But the lesson here involves political and moral analysis as much as it does any mystery of "good interviewing," for in these moments, in taking the abstract cue, "respect," and asking for specifics—or asking perhaps just, "Respect?" —we invite the interviewee to teach us about what they might really mean as they allude to "respect" (or "power," or whatever concepts we hope to

explore.) Here we are not leading our interviewees to any predestination, but we are exploring their insights, their practical wisdom, so that we might learn with them about the world—and not simply prove some point that we've been out to make!

vii. Allow Time for Reflections and "Lessons Learned"

Seventh, I mentioned that three quarters of our interviews might explore the practical trajectory of work from initial engagement to some outcome, success or failure. So what about the other twenty five percent? In our experience, we've tried to build in time for "reflections" and "lessons" and responses to "What else might you have done, if you had it all to do again?" —and also for what we can call, "the practical analysis of surprise," which makes up our eighth guideline. So just a word about each:

Asking for the practitioner's sense of "lessons learned" after they've connected a beginning through a messy middle to some tentative end or outcome reflects not our search for abstract summaries or rules, but instead for the real actors' own senses of what's really been important, what they've found most significant, especially in light of the detailed story that they've just told. Asking for their sense of lessons, then, becomes a way of probing for their senses of significance and value—of warnings or opportunities or less obvious ideas that really deserve attention, if anyone else tries to do this kind of work.

Consider a quick example of a lesson that planner-mediator Susan Podziba shared in her account of working with diverse urban residents in Chelsea, Massachusetts—a small city near Boston—to redraft their city's charter (Podziba 1995). Podziba told us,

We had a list of seventy people. One of the biggest problems was how to hone that list down to eighteen or twenty for the charter preparation team?

At that point I just called a lot of colleagues in the field of mediation and said, “What would you do? How would you do this?” Because I knew that this was a crucial lynchpin in the process, because it meant whether or not the charter preparation team would be viewed as legitimate within the eyes of the community—and I didn’t quite know how to do it.

So, I finally got the best answer. I’d called a lot of people, and Howard Bellman was really right on. He said to me, “Well, if it’s hard to chose twenty, maybe it’s easier to choose three.” What he meant by that was to choose three people in the community who would then choose the twenty. So we did that. That was ingenious, in my opinion.

Here in a few words we see the challenge Podziba faced, constituting a charter preparation team that would appear legitimate to the citizens of Chelsea, and we see Podziba moving from not knowing what to do, through learning, to finding a strategy that would work!

viii. Give "Reflection" Content by Mining the Riches of Surprise

Lastly, as careful and probing listeners, we have the opportunity to ask about surprise, the unexpected, what practitioners might have initially thought but then discovered differently, for better or worse, happily or sadly.

Surprise teaches us, first, about the practitioners' previous working theories, their frameworks of expectations, their ways of understanding politics and processes and perhaps contextual events that led them seriously to believe one thing (and perhaps to invest time and effort and resources accordingly) only to find—surprise! —that their practical world really worked another way (Schön 1983).

Surprise also teaches us about new information that's not only been unexpected but that's relevant and important, that matters. Martha Nussbaum (1990) has referred wonderfully to "the moral relevance of surprise," meaning in part that when we ask practitioners about how they were surprised, we're asking them to share with us their senses not just of what they didn't know but of what they needed to know, what they didn't expect that turned out to matter, to be important, to have value.

Notice again that if we simply asked, "What mattered in this experience?" our interviewee would probably look at us as if we were crazy, "What in the world do you mean?" But if we ask about their experiences of surprise and discovery, we begin to learn not only about their practical perceptions, their preparation, how they approached the challenges they faced, but we learn with them—we learn about what's important in such practices that we too might very well have missed (cf. Forester 2006b).

Not least of all, exploring practitioners' experiences of surprise gives us a specific and practical way of giving real meaning to doing the work of reflection, being reflective, if perhaps not fully deliberative, practitioners (Schön 1983, cf. Forester 1999). To say that we are engaging in reflection, or have left time for reflection, or that we want to encourage one another to reflect on our practice surely must mean more than we wish vaguely to "think about" our practice. If all we mean by "reflection" is "thinking" or "considering" things, then we have emptied the concept of any helpful content; we have taken away any teeth from its bite. If we wish to encourage reflection in a case, we should examine what we had been thinking that did not go as we had expected; we should consider how we have been surprised—for both better and worse—so we can refine our working theories, our initial preparation, so we can do better in the future.

These eight suggestions only begin to sketch the ways we can explore practice more collaboratively, sensitively and ethnographically by using oral historical methods in addition to more conventional social science case studies. The struggle even to do this kind of critically-pragmatic, practice-focused research, though, involves taking on the suspicions of the left and the right alike, those searching for keys to historical change no less than those suspicious of subjectivity and personal accounts (Portelli 1991, Eckstein and Throgmorton 2003, Sandercock 2003). But since so little close examination of practice in the face of power, inequality and ethnic differences exists in our fields, we would do well, this argument suggests, to work harder to identify engaged and thoughtful insiders, actors not spectators; we should gather and analyze their messy practice stories of challenges and opportunities alike; and in doing so we might better be able to appreciate and honor, criticize and refine further, what the committed planners, organizers, and designers around us can really do.

Part Three: Opportunities to Seize By Exploring Interdependence

Now let us turn finally to consider several opportunities that this approach opens up for us. When we explore a practitioner's work in the ways just sketched, we ask early on, of course, some version of "Who were the actors involved—who did you have to work with?"

But any answer to that question leads to the next, of course: "Ah, you had to find a way to work with the rebellious faction, or with the distrusting head of the business council, or with the resident next door who'd been treated badly by one of your colleagues—well, how did you do that?" This seems simple enough, but in what's happening here, we can see that the interviewer subtly shifts from identifying actors and agents and perhaps even networks to analyzing—opening up an exploration of —the practical interdependence and relations of power among those political

and social actors: the designer and client, the members of a task force, the representatives of community organizations, banks, or other governments.

But opening the door to interdependence is like opening a treasure chest—it leads us not simply to examine who knows or believes what—but also to ask how planners and organizers negotiate their relationships in action: so assessing and looking closely at interdependence leads us to questions of practical ethics (the study of the qualities of actions) as well as to questions of epistemology (the study of knowledge)—so it helps us learn about actual moves, engaged work, about real efforts seeking change or resisting change.

Feminists have long argued for attention to embedded relationships, not just to more abstract notions of rights. In the interview context, this means we must ask less, for example, about what an organization looks like on paper and more about how that organization (or process, or strategy) really works—less about job titles and formal responsibilities and more about who really does the work, who really controls the flow of information and resources, who really depends on whom to get anything practical done (Gilligan 1982, Sandercock and Forsyth 1992).

Opening this door to interdependence allows us to ask not only about who seems to "have power," but also, crucially, about where they are vulnerable (requiring public consent or deference, public image or cooperation, and so on)—and so we can, if we pay attention, learn about limits to power. Examining these practical relationships through the work of our interviewees can lead us quickly, if we wish, to the conditions of participation and voice: who can speak and who cannot, who controls the forms of relationship, the relevant languages and processes, the terms upon which ethnic and inter- and intra-communal relationships take shape?

Examining planners' relationships with suspicious community members or with uncooperative agency staff, for example, can lead quickly, too, to examine their organizing and negotiating

strategies and tactics, for better and worse. Assessing negotiations, for example, we can probe the strategies that overcome or fall into the traps of escalation, bluffing, lose-lose gamesmanship that so many negotiators (and planners, organizers, and designers) often hold themselves hostage to—whether they're working with individuals in a ward or organizations in the city or states bordering one another. Assessing these relationships can help us to see, quite intimately, the challenges of face to face negotiations whether set in a conference room across the table from a World Bank representative, whether set on the land near a rural township, or set in a flat as community planners or organizers sort out what oppositional coalitions might possibly form.

What I have called the critical pragmatist's "bias for practice" is not a local bias, but a political and analytic one, a bias to explore and learn more about how many political actors—organizers and planners, in and out of government, locally focused or structurally focused—have more or less influence in and through the significant practices that shape our cities.

Finally, because these practice stories force us to assess differences—differences of identity and language, ritual and style, standpoint and worldview, value commitments and interests—they help us to explore all the ways that the practitioners we're interviewing themselves try to probe and learn about and negotiate those important differences. But here we quickly come to see, too, that as interviewers we join our interviewees, we learn as they have learned; we may be surprised as they have been surprised; we become sensitive to nuances of meaning as they became sensitive practically to those same nuances before us (Forester 2007).

As Martha Nussbaum argues that good literature produces more sensitive readers, so do detailed practitioners' stories produce more sensitive listeners—as powerful and moving practitioners' accounts help produce more awareness, astuteness and insight in students of practice (Nussbaum 1990). In just the same ways, if we want our students to become more sensitive to

differences of culture and worldview, of identities and frameworks of meaning as they matter practically in the planning and design professions, we ought to help those students learn to do careful, probing interviews (Slack 2003). For such interviewing, it turns out, involves not just simple information collection, not just strategies to gather data, but a powerful pedagogy in itself, animating a probing interpretive and political analysis, whether we call it, with Paul Ricoeur, the "hermeneutics of suspicion" or, with Phil Harrison and Leonie Sandercock, a "border crossing" mentality, a critically pragmatic rationality sensitive to difference—a "diasporic rationality," we might call it too (Ricoeur 1970, Harrison 2005, Sandercock 2003).

We are surrounded by far more practical wisdom (and insight into the practical workings of power and conflict, mobilizing and resistance) than our traditional, conventional, even "progressive" ways of looking at our fields allow us to see. Indeed those conventional notions of detachment and the mystique of quantification too easily launder and sanitize the data we can collect—hiding pain, complexity, and opportunity from us—with the result that we all too dimly realize how simplistic views of objectivity blind rather than empower us (Forester 2006c; Umemoto 2006).

So consider one more brief example. In an inclusive, participatory process of setting HIV/AIDS funding priorities and targets in Colorado, planner-mediator Michael Hughes wrestled with the problem of how to enable difficult and painful yet necessary conversations—instead of asking affected people to radically sanitize their voices, to leave their pain, their agonies, at the door. Hughes recalls a difficult patch in this way:

That comment really just touched off a whole discussion about how this was one more example of how racism plays out in our society. I just let that discussion go. It was really difficult. I may have let it go on longer than I ought to have but I

just couldn't bring myself to stop people from having this level of frank discussion. . . I really felt like they needed to get through it, and they needed to have this conversation. It was hard, hard, hard.

As I later learned, it was very uncomfortable for a lot of people who really wished I had stopped it and were very angry at me for not stopping it—because they saw it ultimately as divisive and destructive, rather than painful and then healing. I think that if you spoke to people today about that meeting, there would still be serious disagreement about whether or not that meeting was a good thing or a bad thing. I guess the truth is that I have to . . . say it was both—both necessary and painful, and I understand how, for some people, it was too much. [It was] necessary, I think, because until people were able to express that grievance, they were going to be unable to step back and prioritize populations. (Hughes 1999)

Here in a moment we see past agony shaping future possibility, planning for the future dependent on recognizing emotion and pain rather than repressing or dismissing it, even if some felt threatened by it; we hear Hughes struggling with practical, political, moral judgments of how to go on, how, here, to enable the difficult and painful discussions that some will find too difficult, too painful, but that others will find necessary, even healing, essential to going on together. In passages like these, practitioners help us not just see through their eyes, feel through their hearts, consider judgments about acting as they have, but they help us set our own agendas, help us pose challenges and opportunities of practice more clearly for us to address in our own contexts (Forester 1999).

So this essay has tried to suggest not only that, but how, we can try more carefully to learn from that practical-political wisdom around us, to learn from the struggles and the exemplary

practices of those in our communities who are in their many different ways today actively following in the footsteps of those who have struggled day in and day out with issues of social justice and power, with bureaucracies and coalition-building, with problems and challenges of health care and poverty, poor housing, poor jobs, deteriorating environmental quality, and more. We can not only honor and appreciate exemplary South African practice, but gather its stories and learn from it as well—and to do that, we may all have to learn to ask still better questions—in real fieldwork, in fresh interviews and analysis—than we have often been asking. Perhaps a few of these observations might help prompt a closer look at the engaged, ambitious and potentially instructive urban practices and their possibilities all around us.

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