

# Community Participation in the South African Local Government Dispensation: A Public Administration Scholastic Misnomer

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## ABSTRACT

The interpretation, application and understanding of community participation in the South African local government discourse in particular, is ambiguous, thus, creating a more simplistic and superficial meaning for operationalization. This paper seeks to challenge the notion that community participation is a substitute in its ontological and epistemological form and connotation for public participation. Many scholars in public administration have jumped on the bandwagon of dispensation, thus creating a misnomer in relation to a distinct nature of community participation and public participation which clearly undermines the authenticity of conception within the discipline and scholarship in general. Using a variety of qualitative secondary data collection and analytical techniques, this paper interrogates the misnomer in public administration scholarship in relation to the use and application of community participation specifically in local government. To successfully demonstrate this misnomer regarding the use, application and understanding of the concepts and their impact on scholarship, five selected articles on community participation and five others on public participation on local government published in the *Journal of Public Administration (JOPA)* were reviewed. The paper therefore concludes that the influential role of public administration as a scientific discipline is to forge relations with public administration as a practice for the purposes of conceptualizing and operationalising concepts and terminologies. This will ensure conciseness and bypass the contradictions which have potency of denting both scholarship and practice.

*Keywords:* community participation, public participation, public administration, scholarship, local government

*JEL:* H83

## 1 Introduction

The argument can be made that although public administration scholars tend to refer to community participation and public participation as synonyms with extrapolation to local government, the two are dissimilar in application and meaning. While community participation can be related to the Western ideology catering the elite (Midgley, 1986, p. 177), public participation is inclusive of the general public. According to Masango (2009, p. 125), an elite is a group of people who occupy top positions in the highest and resource-rich political, government, economic, professional, communications and cultural institutions. He further alludes that such elites are different from general public which put trust in church and other social institutional settings rather than in governmental processes. What creates the illusion in scholarship can be related to obscurity in the meaning of the concepts public and community. While van Dijk and Thornhill (2011, p. 5) acknowledge the challenges in conceptualising and finding a consensual definition of what comprises the public, it can be argued that there can be many publics within a public (Warmer, 2002, p. 417; Eriksen, 2004). Similarly, there exist a number of definitions on community participation which can be misleading in the discourse of public administration in particular. This is due to the failure to conceptualise the word community and its origin in relation to its operational use. As a result, scholars in the field have quickly jumped on the bandwagon and grapple with forging their own conceptualisations without any theoretical basis which has not been particularly identified or was simply ignored.

This paper seeks to disentangle different dimensions of conceptualisation by providing the ontological basis of the concepts of community participation and public participation in relation to public administration scholarship with a view of clearing the uninformed misnomer and scholastic-ills in the South African local government arena. The paper argues that the authenticity of the discipline is somehow delegitimised by failure to relate theory with practice in the application of the concepts with specific reference to community participation and public participation. With this in mind, the paper acknowledges the limited sources for conceptual theory to guide the development of the discipline, especially in an era, where public administration scholarship in relation to local government is so dynamic and filled with complexities (Nkuna & Sebola, 2012, p. 72; Nkuna & Sebola, 2014, p. 290), while, in the interim, it should be closer to the people (MaFunisa & Xaba, 2008, p. 454). The paper seeks to uncover the mischievous use, understanding and application of community participation and public participation within the public administration discourse within local government by zooming into the ontological and epistemological origins of the terminology compared to the ideals and realities on the ground.

## **2 Drawing Differences between Community and Public**

Drawing a convincing argument on the differences between what constitutes a community and a public is a major challenge for the purposes of constructing an argument. Community participation and public participation further require one to provide a basis by a way of contemplating and conceptualising the meanings of the terms community and public and relate them to the scholars' discourse of public administration. In the South African context which is so dynamic and complex in nature due to a number of variety of tribes, races and languages, the connotation of the concept of public is quarry to variety of meanings of the word public in general. The Oxford English Dictionary (2014) is so vague and abstruse in alluding to the "true" and conceptual meaning of public as an exact opposite of private. This is a matter of contention and according to Martin (2004) it is a difficult qualification to understand why the "thing" in question was named public in the first place. Coetzee (2010, p. 17) describes public as pertaining to, affecting the people at large or the community. It can be deduced from Coetzee's assertion that communities are a component of the public, and thus cannot be equated with one another. In Greek, community refers to "fellowship" or a group of people coming together for mutual support and fulfilling their needs. A community can be described as a set of people who have commonalities such as same age, sex, ethnicity, tribe, race, faith, experiences, interest and cause (Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 230; Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003, p. 20). Membership in these communities can therefore constitute the general public. With large municipal boundaries in South Africa comprising inhabitants of diversified race, language, colour, tribes etc., the concept community and let alone community participation is therefore irrelevant and lacks logic in relation to its application and practice in local government as it possesses the potential of excluding general members of municipal communities.

For operational purposes, Tshabalala and Lombard (2009, p. 397) refer to a community as defined by a ward system, which is a geographical area into which a municipality is divided for, amongst other purposes, those of elections. However, the ontological origin of the concept is way beyond the limitations as imposed by the operational definition. This argument is based on the fact that community as the concept can be used to describe social organizations (Malena, Forster, & Singh, 2004) and arrangements which are often regarded as natural groupings based on ties of shared blood, language, history, and most importantly, culture (Upadhyya, 2006, p. 14). However, Nzimakwe and Reddy (2008, p. 670) and Tshabalala and Lombard (2009, p. 400) share the same view that participation at a municipal level can be achieved through a smaller demarcated wards where there exists a population having the features of a community. With this being said, scholars of public administration (see Ababio, 2004; Nzimakwe & Reddy, 2008; Phago, 2008; Tshabalala & Lombard, 2009, p. 401; Ndevu, 2011; Vivier & Wentzel, 2013) have studied the complex and complicated nature of community participation

in local government as the concept of community lends itself to a variety of interpretations. It has become so prominent in the discipline to either suffix or prefix community with the terms such as community development, community capacity-building, community economic development, and of course, community participation. This tendency has created a misnomer in the public administration discipline and scholarship as the original ontological meanings are blindly ignored to fit into the discourse by the concepts such as community involvement, engagement and consultation. This paper analyses a trend whereby scholars in their writings tend to emphasise the synonymy between community participation and public participation. This is done by a way of reviewing articles on the subject matter under study.

### 3 Reviewed Articles Published in the Journal of Public Administration (JOPA)

To successfully demonstrate the misnomer regarding the use, application and understanding of the concepts and their impact on scholarship, five selected articles on community participation and five others on public participation on local government published in the *Journal of Public Administration* (JOPA) with no predetermined sequence or logic were reviewed. Table 1 shows the reviewed journal articles.

**Table 1: List of sampled articles**

Community Participation	Public Participation
Nzimakwe, T. I., & Reddy, P. S. (2008). Community Participation in Ethekweni Municipality with Particular Reference to Ward Committees. <i>Journal of Public Administration</i> , 43(4.1), 667–679.	Mafunisa, M. J., & Xaba, B. (2008). Public Participation and the Integrated Development Planning: The Case of Limpopo Province. <i>Journal of Public Administration</i> , 43(3.2), 452–460.
Phago, K. G. (2008). Community Participation during the 21st Century South Africa: Modes, Attitudes and Trends. <i>Journal of Public Administration</i> , 43(2.1), 238–252.	Reddy, P. S., & Sikhakane, B. H. (2008). Public Participation: A Case Study of Ward Committees in the Buffalo City Municipality. <i>Journal of Public Administration</i> , 43(4.1), 680–697.
Tshabalala, E. L., & Lombard, A. (2009). Community Participation in the Integrated Development Plan: A Case Study of Govan Mbeki Municipality. <i>Journal of Public Administration</i> , 44(2), 396–409.	Draai, E., & Taylor, D. (2009). Public Participation for Effective Service Delivery: A Local Government Perspective. <i>Journal of Public Administration</i> , 44(1.1), 112–122.
Ndevu, Z. J. (2011). Making Community-based Participation Work: Alternative Route to Civil Engagement in the City of Cape Town. <i>Journal of Public Administration</i> , 46(4), 1247–1256.	Masango, R. S. (2009). Public Participation: An Imperative for Sustainable Democracy and Effective Service Delivery. <i>Journal of Public Administration</i> , 44(1.1), 123–132.
Vivier, E., & Wentzel, M. (2013). Community Participation and Service Delivery: Perceptions among Residents in Cape Town. <i>Journal of Public Administration</i> , 48(2), 239–250.	Mzimakwe, T. (2010). Public Participation and Engagement in Local Governance: a South African Perspective. <i>Journal of Public Administration</i> , 45(4), 501–519.

With the reviewed articles having been identified, an analysis is sought to draw an analogy in application and comprehension between community

participation and public participation with a view of identifying some of the trends in conceptualisation in the public administration discourse.

#### **4 Community Participation and Public Participation**

There is an existing need to clear the boundaries between the usage, definition, and application between the concepts of community participation and public participation. This seeks to ensure the distinction or perhaps blending of the two, while caution should be taken to undermine the legitimacy through a critique, analysis and the misnomer that it can create in public administration and its influence on practice. Clearly, with community and public being distinct terminology, scholars within their discourse in particular are unenthusiastic to draw the line and at times refer to the concepts interchangeably. Ababio (2004, p. 274), for instance, makes an uninformed mention to community-public-participation as a single concept without providing a theoretical base within which the assertion is supported. Similarly, Nzimakwe and Reddy (2008, p. 675) tend to fiddle in-between community participation and public participation as if they refer to a similar phenomenon. This assertion is made on the basis that the authors only focus on clarifying public participation while referring to community participation, involvement and engagement as principal themes of the paper as well. Commonly, the articles reviewed for the purposes of this paper fail or are somehow reluctant to provide a consolidated conceptualisation or at least elements of what community participation as opposed to public participation is. Muller (1994) and van Vuren (2002) (in Human, Marais, & Botes, 2009, p. 1) acknowledge the difficulties associated with defining community participation. The acknowledgement could be based on insufficient theoretical grounding of the concept.

However, McGee (2000) (in Human, Marais, & Botes, 2009, p. 1) defines community participation as a process through which the community can influence and share control over development initiatives, decisions and resources affecting them. Kotze (1997) (in Nzimakwe & Reddy, 2008, p. 669), on the other hand, defines community participation as the fundamental ethical principle allowing people to control actions that affect them while promoting sustainable socio-economic development, aspects of empowerment, communication and gender imperative. The definition fails to inculcate important concepts such as a community as a basic component of the term and other essential elements such as participation and the area or loci within which such participation takes place. The inclusion of concepts like engagement, involvement and consultation adds to the flavour of confusion. Vivier and Wentzel (2013, p. 240) tend to shift the focus of the debate from community participation and attempt to forge relations with public participation. Evidently, the conceptualisation is based on the concept of public participation rather than community participation without providing analysis on how the latter is indoctrinated to the former. In scholarship where authors of conceptual papers rely mostly on secondary data and theoretical

analysis of articles, with a trend of mischievously providing ungrounded theories, the field of public administration is facing a storm of “sweeping” uniformed contentions. In the article titled “Community Participation during the 21st Century South Africa: Modes, Attitudes and Trends”, Phago (2008) did not succeed in providing a convincing conceptualisation of community participation and unconsciously acknowledges the different societal sectors which form a community while failing to take into cognisance that such small segments constitute a public in an environmental setting. Furthermore, he advocates the involvement of a community within a public realm which clearly should form part of the participatory process due to its inclusivity.

Moodley and Govender (2006, p. 831, in Phago, 2008, p. 242) bring to the fore public consultation as a method of public participation and goals of public participation which theoretically shifted the focus from the discussion on community participation to public participation. Yet another misnomer in the public administration discipline? The answer to this question could be no on account of scholars who tend to make assertions and creating illusions by failing to demarcate, operationalise and conceptualise a subject under study. This is also evidenced by the interchanging use between community-based participation and public participation in Ndevu (2011). What is interesting is the fact that the author does not provide a theoretical delineation of community-based participation which he argues with the conceptualisation of public participation. To this end, the paper focuses on providing different conceptual angles on how public participation should be theorized with a view of clearing a misconception in relation to community participation.

The introduction of a democratic dispensation in South Africa came with opportunities for the previously excluded from public participation for all citizens (Masango, 2009, p. 122). The *Draft National Policy Framework on Public Participation* of 2007 (in Mafunisa & Xaba, 2008, p. 458) defines public participation as an open and accountable undertaking in which individuals and groups within the selected communities exchange their views and influence decision making processes. It remains an ontological contention that communities within the selected municipalities forming a public (Draai & Taylor, 2009, p. 114) take part in the whole integrated process of decision making. Midgley (1986, p. 177) supports this argument by contending that community participation only appeals to Western educated middle-class activists which do not always conform to the expectations of the ordinary citizenry. Thus, in South African municipalities characterised by high levels of poverty and illiteracy, ordinary municipal citizens stand no chance of influencing decision making through participatory processes. This assertion is supported by Masango (2009, p. 129) who creates a demarcation between the elite which is a community by its own right and the general members of the public, whereby such a distinction in practice may bear negative implications and not promote public participation.

Public participation is a proactive rather than a predetermined process where education is necessary for the political elite to foster the public to take charge of their own development initiatives that would promote a new mandate for local government (Draai & Taylor, 2009, p. 114; Tshabalala & Lombard, 2009, p. 405). The African National Congress (1994) (in Masango, 2009, p. 128) states that development is not about the delivery of goods to passive citizens, rather it is about active involvement and participation and growing empowerment. With all this being said, it can be deduced that a democratic process powerful as public participation which lends itself to public administration scholarship characterised by erroneous usage, definition, analysis and understanding is beyond the juxtaposed limited scope of community participation in the local government context. Clearly, bigger involvement of the communities within the public could prove more effective with a positive scholars' influence on practice. Above all, public participation could lead to enhanced local government, effective and accountable service delivery (Reddy & Sikhakane 2008, p. 691; Draai & Taylor 2009, p. 117; Masango 2009, p. 130; Mzimakwe 2010, p. 505).

## **5 Placing Public Participation in the South African Local Government Context**

The South African democratic local government dispensation is founded within the developmental notion wherein all service delivery sectors need to be coordinated (Manyaka & Madzivhandila, 2013, p. 176). South African municipalities have therefore become the "development driver" through service delivery, poverty alleviation, infrastructure and economic development (Patterson, 2008). In a democratic dispensation such as that of South Africa, the participation of communities and public participation in general plays an integral role in ensuring that the developmental mandate of local government is fulfilled. Such participation could also ensure that the citizenry of municipalities develops trust and a sense of belonging to the development initiatives on their own. According to Pasquini and Shearing (2014, p. 275), local government is a sphere of government generally most directly responsible for planning and implementing adaption strategies suitable for the area in which they are located for benefiting the citizenry. Municipalities as government institutions in local government refer to a political portion that is established in terms of Section 155 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa of 1996, and have control over local matters including the authority to raise taxes. This is also established in terms of Section 12 of the Local Government Municipal Structures Act, 117 of 1998. Under the apartheid system, the South Africans were classified by the law as whites, blacks, coloureds and Indians (Mabokela & Mawila 2004, p. 400). Local government was therefore also classified in terms of the racial segregation and division. Such a division meant that the provision of services was centred among the then dominant white race. This system marginalized non-white



population groups from most aspects of national life and effectively sidelined them (Nnadozie, 2013, p. 86).

Public participation in local government was introduced as a democratic principle to correct the imbalances and injustices inflicted by the apartheid government to ensure that all sectors of societies are integrated and receiving equitable services. The end of apartheid and the first all-race elections of 1994 marked a turning point in the socio-economic and political landscape of South Africa. It must, however, be noted that the post-apartheid government did not fully make great inroads in terms of closing the gaps opened by the apartheid government particularly on the matters of service delivery in local government. Service delivery protests, among other challenges, are indicative of the fact that South Africa has not yet fully recovered from the apartheid legacy (Mpehle, 2012, p. 216). Having adopted the service delivery challenges imposed by the apartheid government, new democratic dispensation was expected to deal speedily with those injustices and imbalances by ensuring that the public would fully and actively participate in local government affairs in relation to service delivery and ensuring good governance and accountability.

## **6 Public Participation in the Integrated Development Plan: An Illustration**

Public participation is erroneously used interchangeably with community participation particularly giving inference to the Integrated Development Plan (IDP). Ababio (2004) believes that community participation and public participation mean one and the same thing. According to Mafunisa and Xaba (2008, p. 458), public participation in the IDP exists only if the affected stakeholders, the municipal community in particular, integrally take part in decision-making and the implementation process. The notion of public participation whereby communities are central to decision-making and development should thus be centralised to the IDP model. The IDP in local government is used to create a platform for sharing ideas with the public affected by such development initiatives as proposed in the plan. Fox and Meyer (1995, p. 98) define public participation as the involvement of municipal communities in the wide range of administrative policy-making activities including the determination of levels of service, budget priorities and the acceptability of physical construction projects in order to position government programmes towards the needs of the community to support building and encouraging society cohesiveness. It is for this reason this paper argues that public participation in the IDP accommodates and accepts the views not of a particular class but of the general citizenry which can be affected as opposed to a community.

To this end, it can be attested that public participation is not only the mere presence of the municipal communities, but active participation in the affairs



of such a municipality in order to ensure that development and service provision are driven within the interests of the public. Public participation is a strong mechanism in a democratic South Africa, and in the municipalities in particular, as the governmental sphere is mandated with developmental duties and constituents closer to the people (Draai & Taylor, 2009, p. 115). It is also a core value to South Africa and a way of protecting and strengthening a relatively new democracy (Phago, 2008, p. 251; Vivier & Wentzel, 2013, p. 241). Public participation in the IDP necessitates the involvement of the municipal general citizens in decision-making, need identification and the ability to influence decisions and objections in cases of varying opinions. This should not be conceived as synonyms between public participation and community participation as are often the failings of modern scholarship in the discourses on local government and public administration in particular.

## **7 The Discourse on Public Administration and Scholarship**

In order to provide a contextual clarity on the demised state of the public administration scholarship, it is equally important to have a comprehensive view of the scholastic inputs in relation to other distinguishing features while aiming to outline its relevance in the current discourse and the state of the discipline. Scholarship is vital for addressing matters of the modern bureaucracy citizens are faced with in addressing the balance between good governance and creating "pure science". It is also worth noting that public administration as both discipline and practice influence the development of each other. Scholarship therefore has the potential of improving levels and the quality of practice, while public administration can be understood as processes, organizations and individuals carrying out rules and laws adopted through the branches of government (Ott & Russel, 2000, p. 1; Burkeley & Rouse, 2004, p. 7). Public administration as discipline is an academic subject of study which seeks to understand, develop, criticise and improve the professional practice (Phago & Thani, 2014, p. 72). The discipline is associated with Woodrow Wilson who was the first to consider the science of public administration as an area of study and became influential. With a diversity of subject areas within the discipline, public administration scholarship can be defined as the provision of theoretical and empirical answers through primary and secondary data by a researcher in the field with a view of coming up with the most difficult resolutions (Lynn, 2007, p. 13). With that being said, it can be deduced that public administration scholarship seeks to influence through secondary and primary data the activities of government institutions, parastatals and agencies (Phago & Thani, 2014, p. 72).

Even though public administration seeks to influence practice, current trends in scholarship bring to the fore the necessities for scholars to be acquainted with practice so as to avoid contradictions necessitated by the ideals in theory and the realities on the ground. Of course, public administration scholars should reconsider the area of study and engage in discussions with

related disciplines in an effort to enhance knowledge base of the discipline and to improve the quality and service rendering to society (Thornhill, 2006, p. 793). Hence, public administration is fiddled with a misnomer in an attempt to disentangle the concepts such as community participation and public participation. The culture of dependency on a source extends across the scholars' discourse on knowledge-generation and dissemination. According to Stout (2013, p. 15), the field of public administration stands for substantive contributions to public affairs and it is therefore necessary to skill and develop scholars. This will enable them to grasp critical qualitative methodologies which are scientifically informed. Such stems from the reality that scholars in the discipline are mostly engaged in intellectual communities unaware of the lessons that could be learnt in other literatures.

Candler, Azevedo and Albernaz (2010, p. 7) identify the challenges inhibiting the development of public administration scholarship, hence concepts such as community participation and public participation lend themselves to various and sometimes confusing conceptualisations. The first challenge is epistemic colonialism which is a critical adoption of administrative structures and techniques from elsewhere, especially the former colonial or current hegemonic power. As alluded before, the concept of community participation is closely related to the Western ideologies of excluding the general public and accommodating the elite in participatory processes. This is a heavy and questionable penetration of inappropriate foreign theory in public administration literature. The concept, however, lends itself to various and confusing interpretations and applications in the scholars' discourse. The second challenge in the development of public administration scholarship is epistemic nationalism which refers to an undiscerning rejection of lessons from elsewhere. This form of a challenge requires scholars to engage with literature at an international perspective which could somehow reveal dimensions at which one might probe a phenomenon at various organisational contexts. The last challenge is epistemic parochialism which is a self-absorption to the extent that the intellectual community is unaware of the lessons that could be learnt from other literatures.

Perhaps South African scholars in public administration must start engaging and writing in transdisciplinary research areas and journals which is a primary step towards scholarship. With this being said, it can be alluded that there is a lack of scholarly renewal and very little theory development (Chipkin & Menty-Gilbert, 2012, p. 115) in the discipline. Public administration scholars pay little attention to formal and informal norms and organisational networks and the nature of state-society relationships.

## **8 Conclusion**

In the terms of upper ontology, which relates to the concepts supporting development of ontology referred to as meta-ontology, tracing the original conceptual forms of the concepts of community participation and public participation had to be conducted. If participation in local government is referred to as "community", it poses a danger of implying lack of inclusiveness to the municipal general public. Having interrogated the original theoretical meanings of community and public would suggest that participation through ward committees within the municipalities representing diversity, public participation through communities would be suitable for operationalization and ringing a bell in practice. Discussions among scholars on the matters of controversy are therefore necessary to ensure the authenticity and avoid contradiction in the discipline. This is due to the state of public administration in South Africa who has with no doubt deteriorated and is characterised by repletion of the subject areas in research and discourse. Although the argument as sustained in the paper, tracing the ontological foundations of hard-to-define and contextualise concepts, is necessary. Whilst participation is inclusive of all communities, community participation only accommodates for few elites at the expense of ordinary citizens.

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## IZVLEČEK

### *1.02 Pregledni znanstveni članek*

## **Sodelovanje skupnosti v južnoafriškem lokalnem upravnem sistemu: napačno znanstveno poimenovanje**

Pojmovanje, uporaba in razumevanje koncepta »sodelovanje skupnosti« zlasti v diskurzu južnoafriške lokalne samouprave je nejasno, kar ustvarja poenostavljen in površinski pomen operacionalizacije koncepta. Namen tega članka je izpodbijati pojem, da lahko ontološko obliko in konotacijo koncepta sodelovanja skupnosti nadomestimo s konceptom »udeležba javnosti«. Številni akademski strokovnjaki na področju javne uprave se pridružujejo večini, ki podpira takšno interpretacijo, uporabo in razumevanje koncepta, kar ustvarja napačno poimenovanje v zvezi z izrazito drugačno naravo sodelovanja skupnosti in udeležbe javnosti. To nedvomno spodkopava verodostojnost pojma, ki se uporablja v disciplini in akademski stroki na splošno. Z analizo različnih kvalitativnih sekundarno zbranih podatkov in analitičnih tehnik proučuje avtor članka napačno poimenovanje koncepta udeležbe javnosti, kot se uporablja v javni upravi kot disciplini in predmetu znanstvenega proučevanja, zlasti na področju lokalne samouprave. Da bi napačno rabo, uporabo in razumevanje obeh konceptov ter njun vpliv na akademsko stroko lahko uspešno dokazal, je pregledal pet izbranih člankov o sodelovanju skupnosti in pet člankov o udeležbi javnosti v lokalni samoupravi, objavljenih v Reviji za javno upravo (JOPA – *Journal of Public Administration*). V tem članku prihaja do zaključka, da si mora javna uprava kot znanstvena disciplina s svojo vplivno vlogo prizadevati za vzpostavitev odnosov z javno upravo kot prakso za namene konceptualizacije in operacionalizacije konceptov in terminologije. To bi zagotovilo točnost konceptov in odpravilo nasprotja, ki lahko preoblikujejo tako akademsko stroko kot prakso.