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Title: Exploring Whether There Is An Optimal Relationship Between Public Bureaucracies And Communities

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Abstract

In this paper, Michael Kendrick explores some of the key factors in the creation of a positive and constructive relationship between bureaucracy and community. This builds on his existing notions of the “right relationship” between a person with a disability and a service worker, by extending this concept to the relationship between public bureaucracies¹ and communities. Some of the features of this relationship are the sharing of authority, shared commitment, the concept of “withness” and the value of local responses. This excellent article also outlines several other key features of the development of this “right relationship”.

Introduction

Many people tend to see communities and public bureaucracies as necessarily existing in opposition to each other, with the “people” being upheld by “community” and “the system” being the enemy that needs to be vanquished. This need not be the case. Each might conceivably minimise the antagonistic relationship and improve their position if an optimal interrelationship between the two realms was possible. It is important to consider what might be an optimal relationship between communities and public bureaucracies in order to better appreciate and enable the assets of each to be combined and ultimately ensure that beneficial results occur for people.

The attempt to define an optimal relationship is not meant to suggest that both public bureaucracies and communities need to do everything together. There are many advantages to communities having their own autonomy to think and act freely, such as is seen in the case of independent, community supported advocacy. Similarly, when public bureaucracies lack the independence and integrity to perform their duty in a professional and ethical manner, the public interest and welfare of the community is compromised. What follows here is a brief and very preliminary discussion of the variable roles of governments, their bureaucracies and communities, and what might be the features of a more optimal relationship between them.

¹ The term “public bureaucracies” is an awkward one. However, in this instance, it is being used to draw a distinction between bureaucracies that are entirely private or commercial and those that are directly involved in some publicly sanctioned purpose. While “public bureaucracies” can often be those of public or statutory agencies, they can also be those of community organisations who are essentially under contract with public agencies, since their purposes, roles and functions are essentially entwined with those of public agencies.

The Changing Role of Government, Community and Public Bureaucracy

A helpful distinction can be made between what many people call community or “civil society”, and government or “the State”. Although they are interdependent elements of society overall, they are quite different in their characters and roles. For instance, governments do rely largely on families to provide support for the young and dependent persons, yet the roles each plays are quite different. Government authority is normally legislative and regulatory. In comparison, community has no legislative power, but its values and sentiments commonly have profound influence on what policies the government might or might not be able to legitimise. Public bureaucracies are normally instruments the State uses to achieve its aims, though many of these may remain nominally “private” or even “quasi-public” as a matter of precise legal standing.

In recent decades, governments have massively expanded their role as a mediator of much of community, family and personal life through the medium of funding and overseeing formalised service systems. This evolution has been brought about by many pressures originating within community for establishing and financing formal services for all kinds of community, family and personal needs. As a consequence, modern communities have become increasingly dependent on government involvement and financing in order to pursue goals in education, health, transportation, leisure, the environment, the care of special populations, public safety, the arts and so forth.

This increasing dependency has gradually altered the character of the relationship between governments and communities. Overall, governments have become more interventionist in community, family and personal life. The historical pattern of interdependence of the two realms has shifted to one in which the government is now more dominant and engaged than in the past. As government has taken on greater responsibilities for the quality of community life, its interests and preferences have also become a proportionally expanding factor in community life, including its capacity to displace governance over matters that previously had been largely under the control of community, family or citizens.

Although many large governmental bureaucratic empires have resulted, it would be incorrect to portray this evolution as being solely a deliberate form of public bureaucratic imperialism. For instance, the growth of non-profit community based organisations has itself been enormous and rapid and has surely been propelled by interests outside of those of public bureaucracies. This interventionist role for government in community life has been at the behest of large constituencies of all kinds within community. Government, for its part, maintains many mechanisms through which it legitimises its actions and policies, by demonstrating its apparent conscientious willingness to consult and “partner” with community. Irrespective of whether these arrangements do in fact constitute an authentic “partnership”, governments maintain a clear need to at least appear to be in harmony with the sentiments, priorities and sensitivities of communities. In

this aspect, government maintains its historical interdependence with community.

The growth of formalised services in all areas of community life has spawned a corresponding growth in the bureaucracies that manage such large scale enterprises. People quite commonly “receive” not only services but also the bureaucracies that organise, govern, regulate and perpetuate these formal services – the ever present “silent partner”. The precise relationship between people and these public bureaucracies often constitutes an unspoken and only tacitly defined “partnership” because it usually occurs without any explicit discussion between the “partners” concerning the specific terms of the partnership. Often, the bureaucracy simply initiates a bureaucratic priority and some kind of new structural relationship ensues in a “de facto” sense. The community, by yielding to or engaging with such structures, essentially legitimises the new pattern of relations between the community and the public bureaucracy. Equally, there are many instances where the public bureaucracy is forced to contend with community demands, and may yield to these despite its preferences to do otherwise. In both instances, a form of partnership will emerge, though the specific merits of that partnership may be quite another matter.

Bureaucratized services have often relied heavily on the experience of private and corporate bureaucracies as models for how human service bureaucracies ought to be devised and managed. This has resulted in human services importing much of the ethos of the technocratic culture that is typical of most corporate bureaucracies. The fusion of bureaucratic behaviour with a reliance on a wide range of systems and technologies including behavioral, organisational and informational systems, give such bureaucracies their present technocratic cast.

Though it would be unwise to over generalise, technocratic bureaucracies have normally been associated with a reliance on elite, top-down managerial or professional decision-making coupled with organisational hierarchy. They commonly rely on prescriptive systems and technologies, and have a preference for formalisation. Technocratic bureaucracies also tend to utilise what Michael Ignatieff calls “rented strangers” as the principal means to operationalise services. They frequently cultivate the appearance of rationality, meritocracy and evidence-based practice as being normative drivers. They quite routinely utilise management generalists whose authority derives not from their area of substantive experience, but from generic management abilities i.e. they are “content-free” managers. They tend to give priority to interactions with other corporate bodies, and embrace a worldview that emphasises a preference for solutions from within the bureaucracies rather than from without.

It is notable that even the bureaucracies of non-governmental and voluntary organisations, which have historically arisen from within community and commonly see themselves as champions of community, have rather quickly

adopted the same technocratic ethos as their funders. It is also notable that the face of government for ordinary citizens is no longer just the government's own bureaucracies. It is also the rented or purchased bureaucracies of the non-government organisations who now do the government's bidding through a vast and complex web of contracts, programs and mechanisms, many of which are incomprehensible to most ordinary citizens. These government proxies or surrogates often still maintain vestiges of their citizen or community heritage, but most will admit to a profound dependence on government for their survival and functioning as opposed to being nurtured exclusively by the communities that spawned them originally.

To call such services "community services" may now be quite misleading. Many of these services become purveyors of whatever it is that government wants provided and have thus substituted the role of being a "provider" for that of being an agent of communities. However, their external location in regards to government can provide them with considerable latitude to interpret their work and role in ways that may diverge from various government orthodoxies. In this regard, many may "render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's", but reserve their ultimate loyalty for the people, families and communities they serve (Matthew 22:21). Naturally, it is organisations like this that will see value in dissenting from the government on matters crucial to the independent interests of community.

While there is a certain convenience in making generalisations about both government and community, it has its dangers. One of these is that of not recognising how different governments and public bureaucracies can be from each other, just as specific communities invariably diverge from whatever reductionist and homogenising stereotypes we apply to them. It is important to appreciate this variance, because it helps illuminate the ways that both realms can make choices that take them in measurably different directions, and with considerably different outcomes being achieved.

What follows is a set of observations and discussion of what might make the relationship between public bureaucracies and communities a more agreeable and even optimal relationship. Having said that both of these realms are constantly in one kind or another of partnering relationship to each other, either explicitly or implicitly, it is useful to try to articulate what might be an optimal relationship between them. It would be very difficult to achieve an optimal relationship without some effort at defining it, as a shared vision of an ideal partnership would be required prior to actually achieving it.

Improving the Relationship between Public Bureaucracies and Communities

It is quite conceivable for the relationships between public bureaucracies and community stakeholders to vary from being extremely positive to damaging.

Much of this will depend on whether either party is willing to commit to a more optimal relationship to the other. In the best instance of these “optimal relationships” would be one in which the bureaucracy and community share a code of ethical conduct towards the other. This prospect is captured by the application of the Buddhist ethical concept of “right relationship” (Kendrick 2000).

- **“Right Relationship” As A Shared Commitment And Ideal**

Though it may surprise many people whose view of public bureaucracies, and possibly governments, is very negative, many bureaucracies see considerable worth in fashioning their work in ways that highlight the potential independent role and unique assets of community. This can be seen in examples such as community policing, collaborations with grass roots and community groups, a wide swath of largely voluntary community initiatives and so on that rely heavily on community resources. Beneath all of these is the recognition of an essential partnering between public bureaucracies and communities to achieve outcomes that neither could achieve solely on their own. Right relationship is achieved when there is a genuine desire to partner with the other, an appreciation of the others’ strengths and capacity to contribute, and a willingness to have an ethical relationship, both at the level of daily interactions, as well as in regards to structures and formal roles. The absence of such an ethic would undoubtedly undermine the likelihood that either party could count on the other, since neither would want to be held to a promise of acting with integrity.

- **The Sharing of Authority, Stewardship And Governance**

It is possible to develop partnerships between communities and public bureaucracies in which the local community emerges with authority and governance over many matters. For example, community may accept responsibility for the stewardship of assets, be they people or material assets. So, it is not unusual that communities can and do play a role in cooperating with governments on matters as diverse as public health, the environment and public safety. The resulting partnerships offer the possibility of better solutions that rely on the complementary contributions of both community and public bureaucracy.

Not all partnerships will be successful. It is conceivable that the weaknesses of each party may coalesce to defeat the overall effort. Furthermore, if public bureaucracies ignore the extent to which communities can play a useful role in decision-making, planning and managing complex matters, and instead retreat to a paternalistic dominance of communities, then it is predictable that communities and bureaucracies will move towards misalignment. The same would be true in reverse if communities were unwilling to grant a suitable constructive role for public bureaucracies, as this would eliminate partnering itself, quite apart from whether the partnerships might have been ethical. Nonetheless, a united effort serves to create the potential for many advances due to the fact that each party seeks to be *properly* aligned with the other in order to make success more likely.

- **The Place Of A Shared Commitment To The Common Good**

“Common good” is a concept that can be very helpful in getting parties that risk misalignment to see the value of ethical partnering and the costs of acting unilaterally. Common good refers to the public good or public interest, and is a useful concept in making a distinction between the general well being of a community and the pursuit of narrow self-interest. It has no effect unless the parties embrace it as something they genuinely care about. Narrow self-interest cannot be easily reconciled with concepts such as enlightened self interest, as there will be times when the common good is not helped by the exclusive consideration and pursuit of a selfish interest. It is not always obvious what exactly might be the common good at a given moment, but that may matter less than the simple question of vital interest and obligation for both.

- **The Ethic of “Witness” As A Foundation Of Partnership**

The essence of two parties coming together for a common good is in the fact that they are doing so jointly. Public bureaucracies and elements of communities can often nominally share common goals and values, but refuse nonetheless to work together. By making the decision to act in concert with each other they are, in effect, a partnership in which each party’s role is seen as essential to the outcome. This can be seen in those relationships between communities and service bureaucracies that are acted out at the level of individuals and families, small groups with common needs, agency and system governance boards and other levels in which communities, or engaged elements of them, could play a part.

The quality embodied by such relationships is that of “witness” (See also Kendrick 2000). Witness refers to a conscious social ethic of acting jointly in a consistent manner. Witness encourages the aims of bureaucracies and elements of communities to overlap, to be productive and to advance conditions on the ground. It normally means sacrificing a measure of absolute autonomy in favour of collaborative arrangements that promise better solutions to problems and that leave both bureaucracies and the community strengthened and valued rather than weakened, supplanted or degraded.

- **The Value Of Localisation In Building Partnerships With Communities**

It is self evident that most relational life in communities is local and face-to-face. We can belong to larger communities of interest, including national and international versions of these, both in reality and in cyberspace, but the most traditional meaning of community involves people living in localities where much of what is important can occur face-to-face. It would therefore seem imprudent to

ignore or undermine local initiatives in favour of meanings of “community” that are more of the shared network variety.

Many public bureaucracies may, for any number of reasons, lack confidence in local communities and therefore avoid engaging people or the community at a local or regional level. Instead they may prefer to rely on internal-to-bureaucracy localisation structures that serve to supercede and deny any local participation, albeit while preserving the appearances of some form of local bureaucratic responsiveness. An example of this can be seen in the widespread practice of state and national level bureaucracies establishing regional offices to deal with localised matters. Centrally imposed regional offices can often be a lost opportunity for community strengthening, and constitute a way in which community is needlessly supplanted by a bureaucratic entity which is ultimately loyal to that which created it, and may even subvert community. Similarly, many communities may undermine local bureaucratic influence by constantly going over the head of local bureaucratic decision-makers or by going around duly constituted local bureaucratic decision-making bodies. If communities, and the individuals that live in them, are to be reasonably self-sufficient in managing most of the crucial life decisions they must make, then it is important that bureaucracies do not disempower them by usurping their capacity to make these decisions.

- **“Top Down” Versus “Bottom Up” Capacities**

It is within the scope of most bureaucracies to decide whether they elect to prescribe solutions to individuals and communities from the top down, or whether they prefer to strengthen the capacities of people and communities to solve matters in ways that make sense to them given their location “on the ground”. In the latter instance, a provision within bureaucracies for “bottom up” solutions will inevitably mean a greater diversity of local solutions, and an increased probability that the fit of the solution to what people may really need is more likely. This is because “bottom up” solutions normally have the advantage of being authored by the people that have to live with them.

The decision of solely relying on “top down” strategies of decision-making will undoubtedly leave the elites of the public bureaucracies with greater authority, discretion and control, but this may come at the expense of leaving many others who are not so well situated inside or outside the bureaucratic hierarchy, out of the decision-making process. It also relegates powers to bureaucracies that can easily be shared with individuals and communities through various mechanisms of delegated authority. Should such authority be delegated downward, it would be subject to whatever conditions those persons who hold bureaucratic authority might require. Often these crucial details can be negotiated with the parties in the community who will be assigned a measure of delegated and decentralized authority. If one recalls that bureaucracies can choose partnership with

community, it raises the question of what would be valid rationales for excluding and disempowering individuals and communities.

- **Reducing Reliance On Formal Methods and Structures**

Grass roots community initiatives are generally known for their emphasis on relationships, values, initiative and informality. By contrast, public bureaucracies are often thought to be overly reliant on form and procedure and for an avoidance of relationships and personal discretion. This needn't be the case, if bureaucracies opt instead for a more nuanced approach that makes allowance for flexible practices which are "people friendly" on the ground. If people and communities are to be partnered with, it need not come at a cost to the very things that make communities both a web of face-to-face relationships and rich in having their own institutions and assets. The recognition by bureaucracies that communities have social capital is not enough if the way that this capital is forced to express itself differs from the preferences of individuals and communities (Putnam 1995). Hence, the value in using methods that are people friendly.

It is useful to see that formal structures need not always be rigid, inflexible and non-negotiable. Public bureaucracies have long had available to them a tradition of being willing and able to modify crucial facets of bureaucratic processes to better accommodate the needs of communities. This bias towards giving priority to "people friendly" methods is more common than may be imagined. This is because there have always been good rationales for linking optimal bureaucratic performance and responsive relationships with community constituencies.

Negotiability Of Both Bureaucratic Goals, Priorities and Structures As Well As Those In The Community

It is very difficult to properly partner when the bottom line is that nothing is changeable. On the other hand, if both can change their mind, then it becomes possible to significantly alter the character of the shared bureaucracy at work by allowing other visions, preferences and structures to be proposed, evaluated for their merit, and adopted if worthy. However, such negotiability is merely decorative rhetoric if nothing substantial is ever allowed to be negotiated in practice. The dialogue and partnership really only begins when something meaningful might be actually subject to change or transformation.

Conclusion

This preliminary exploration of some of the key factors that would help make community-bureaucracy relationships more positive and constructive is not meant to be comprehensive, but rather to begin to frame the overall issue and offer evidence of features that would plausibly help optimise these relationships if they were adopted. There is evidence from the many people friendly practices that currently exist to suggest that a right relationship is possible between

individuals and communities and the bureaucracies they must interact with. However, it would help to move the issue to a level of clarity whereby it may be possible to better see what is most important for both theory and practice. It is only when the matter is clear enough that people can decide what to commit themselves to.

Reference List

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