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Experience, expertise, and the rational ideal: Funds of knowledge and influence in Oregon's decision-making bodies

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ABSTRACT

Building on longstanding debates about communicative rationality in policymaking, this article introduces the “funds of knowledge” approach to identifying how individuals access and utilize information in public discourse. Drawing on 46 interviews with first- and second-generation immigrants serving on public decision-making bodies in Oregon, the authors analyzed a subset of individuals who used their lived experience, rational expertise, or both while engaging in their respective bodies. Based on interviewees’ perceived level of influence over policymaking, the authors present new insights on the importance of knowledge expression in designing participatory spaces that aim to be inclusive in increasingly diverse communities.

KEYWORDS

Communicative rationality;
funds of knowledge;
immigrants; influence;
public participation

Introduction

As reflected in current public administration theory, there is growing interest in placing communities at the center of government decision-making processes. Scholars and practitioners agree that public engagement is necessary for establishing legitimate governance, and residents increasingly expect to play a role in shaping public policy that impacts their lives. Expectations for government have moved beyond service delivery toward creating fulfilling experiences for individuals (Zingale, Cook, & Mazanec, 2018). Moreover, regions and localities in the United States, such as the Pacific Northwest, that were previously mostly White until the 21st century (García, Garfinkel-Castro, & Pfeiffer, 2019) have become more diverse. Such jurisdictions have seen mounting calls for decision making to reflect the full range of demographic identities, with particular emphasis on including communities that have historically been underrepresented and marginalized in policymaking.

Yet, designing inclusive spaces requires administrators, planners, and public engagement professionals to decipher how power operates within decision making and to implement design elements that help balance structural power differentials (Meléndez & Martinez-Cosio, 2019). Government staff and practitioners must also be cognizant that

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including underrepresented members of the public on decision-making bodies¹ and incorporating design features that make their participation more authentic will not address systemic and structural inequities built into how government sets priorities and distributes resources. Authentic participation—that is, bringing one’s full self to engagement while having the potential to be impactful—is not a “democratic panacea” (Meléndez & Parker, 2019). Indeed, the disinvestment of government at all levels of public society over the last 50 years has given rise to a deliberative industrial complex, similar to Cruikshank’s (1999) notion of “technologies of citizenship.” As Arnstein (1969) anticipated, efforts to “empower” underrepresented groups are rarely coupled with real power to change communities in structural ways. However, this does not absolve jurisdictions and deliberative practitioners from meeting basic norms of governance, namely that government bureaucracies should represent the communities they serve (Mosher, 1968; Riccucci & Van Ryzin, 2017) and that practitioners should develop tools for achieving the social conditions on which their theoretical ideal of equality is based. This is especially important for immigrant communities, which lack meaningful representation at all levels of government (Nishishiba, 2012). Their involvement in decision-making bodies can serve as an alternate way for them to influence policy and outcomes (Hafer & Ran, 2016; Quick & Feldman, 2011). Feminist scholars (e.g., Bacchi, 2009; Fraser, 1990; Harding, 2005; Young, 1987) have argued that expanding the landscape of who engages in the public sphere also expands the field of topics deliberated and the real-life ways problems are framed and potentially solved.

This article focuses on one foundational way that power manifests in participatory governance spaces—through access to knowledge, expertise, and ways of knowing. Drawing on interviews with 46 first- and second-generation immigrants serving in public decision-making bodies across the state of Oregon, our study sought to uncover how participants employed various “funds of knowledge” based in lived experience, identities, and cultural and institutional affiliations (Esteban-Guitart, Monreal-Bosch, Palma, & González-Ceballos, 2020). The funds-of-knowledge approach was initially developed by researchers in education and anthropology as a framework for incorporating knowledge systems familiar to culturally diverse students into the highly rational U.S. education model. Central to this approach is identifying knowledge and skills that individuals (i.e., students) use in their homes and communities that can be activated in other settings (i.e., a classroom). Our study drew on this framework to examine the sources of knowledge immigrants employed within decision-making bodies. Further, it examined whether immigrants felt they had more influence over government decisions if they relied more heavily on knowledge based in lived experience or in rational training, the latter of which is common in Western professional, academic, and technical education.

This study’s findings contribute important insights into the kinds of knowledge that immigrants rely on to participate in decision making and to influence decision makers. We argue that to create inclusive and empowering forums for participation, bureaucrats and decision makers should actively level the playing field, balancing highly rational forms of knowledge (derived largely from Western educational experiences) with knowledge that is contextualized, experiential, cultural, and non-rational. Our findings suggest that in decision-making bodies where all types of knowledge are valued, participants are more likely to experience greater satisfaction and productivity

(Meléndez & Hoff, [In Press](#)). This article concludes with recommendations for facilitating decision-making processes that seek to include different forms of knowledge expression.

Literature review

In this section, we review scholarship in the fields of public administration and planning which has theorized extensively about how members of the public enact various roles within the context of government-sponsored public participation. Several theoretical approaches within public administration help explain dominant communicative norms in public discourse, participant identity formation and expression, and methods for influencing policy decisions. For the first time within the public administration literature, we employed a funds-of-knowledge approach to better articulate how individuals from marginalized groups in our study drew on lived experience and identity in government decision-making spaces. Although scholars have examined the ways communicative norms and practices operate in group processes, few have elucidated who has access to various types of knowledge and how they are used and valued in practice. Our funds-of-knowledge approach connects the *what*—knowledge production and communication—to *who* benefits or is excluded by it. This new contribution to the field offers a foundation for analyzing how immigrants' contributions in decision-making bodies relate to perceptions of their influence over policy outcomes.

Rationality in the public sphere

Communication in the public sphere is an essential component of Western democracies. Public spaces act as meeting places between informal social interaction and the institutions that oversee individuals' lives (Habermas, 1996). Public opinion is formed through daily interactions, which in turn influence and shape debates within institutional policy arenas (Bruns Ali & Ganapati, 2020). Through these formal and informal encounters, messages move between and among residents, stakeholders, bureaucrats, and policymakers.

In the 1970s, the “deliberative turn” in public decision making centered on Habermas's (1996) notion of communicative rationality, which figured prominently in most theories of public communication. Although Habermas rejected Weberian ideals of pure rationality, he espoused an objective, techno-rational view of communication within policy spaces, whereby public decisions are made by abstracted, self-interested individuals measuring policy choices and using patterns of rhetoric and argumentation (Bruns Ali & Ganapati, 2020). As a result, evidence-based policymaking has cemented a rationalist view in which “expert knowledge is seen as able to provide technically superior instruments ... to implement given political goals” (Triantafillou, 2015, p. 174). Further, as in Western educational contexts, technical evidence-based forms of deliberation are commonly assumed to be inherently superior mechanisms for creating policy. Despite longstanding debate about Habermas's theories, the emphasis on rationality undergirds public administration's approach to decision making within the tradition of deliberative democracy.

Critics of Habermas (1996) have disputed the notion that public interactions within governance systems follow inherently rational cognitive processes. Feminist scholars have theorized more complex processes in which highly subjective contextual factors—reliant on life history and memories—shape actors’ multifaceted behaviors (Braaten, 1995; Pajnik, 2006). Feminist views of discourse often emphasize an ethic of care as a primary motivator for “intersubjective action,” which relies on relationships, active listening, and authentic motivation to understand diverse experiences (Pajnik, 2006, p. 391). Concepts, such as “communicative thinking” and “communicative action” speak to the need for communicative theories that move beyond rationalism. Paterson and Scala (2017) highlighted that frameworks of public discourse based in neutrality have been key drivers of social inequality—a critique emblematic of Young’s (2000) claims that objectivity merely reinforces existing hierarchies of power and privilege in which already powerful actors exert more influence than marginalized ones.

For these reasons, Young (2000) and others have argued that truly inclusive political communication must move beyond rational discourse and embrace subjectivity, relationality, and contextual knowledge. Including underserved groups in public discourse requires not only formal access, but also meaningful changes to communicative norms which allow multiple forms of expression and meaning making. Stories are one important form of expression in which community and personal identities are formed and shared. They add critical context and nuance to information that might otherwise be seen as purely objective (Liggett, 2014). Storytelling follows a strong cultural tradition of the *testimonio*, or personal narrative, as an essential tool for counteracting and disrupting the depersonalized nature of dominant U.S. political discourse (De La Vega, 2014; Young, 2000). Underrepresented groups, such as immigrants who may not be trained in rational methods common in Western educational systems may bring rich life experiences that deviate in important ways from nonimmigrant stories and create new participatory landscapes. Conversations about important policy issues expand when participants “take their private interests and personal life projects as a main point of departure and see their participation in terms of personal transformation and self-actualization” (Hustinx & Denk, 2009, pp. 213–214).

Other scholars have advocated an ethic of “activist deliberation” (Fung, 2005) that actively works to alter the political conditions on which deliberation relies. Fung (2005) wrote, “Earnest dedication to fair deliberation should lead more powerful parties, when pressed, to reject the fiction of equality by acknowledging that they derive advantages from their relative economic cultural, and status positions” (p. 407). In this view, deliberative practitioners are called to work toward equity by acknowledging differential power and embracing a proactive approach to changing the status quo.

Collaborative decision-making theories also emphasize a relational quality of discourse which departs from more individualistic models of deliberation. Collaborative rationality is defined in part by its emphasis on authentic deliberation among diverse actors (Innes & Booher, 2010). According to some scholars, these forms of public engagement—including narrative inquiry, communicative theory, discourse analysis, rhetorical criticism, and consensus building—are built on a critique of rationalist models of decision making (Bruns Ali & Ganapati, 2020). Central to these systems is the concept of “co-production,” in which public professionals move away from acting as

impartial rule enforcers or technical experts and instead draw directly from the “knowledge, resources, and motivations of civil society actors” (Triantafillou, 2015, p. 180). Although such policymaking procedures still rely on technical tradeoffs and objective evaluations, placing communities at the center of public processes can help incorporate underrepresented perspectives and community impacts as core variables in policy decision making (Hafer & Ran, 2016).

Funds of knowledge and identity

To better classify how immigrants draw on diverse ways of knowing and communicate their experiences in public deliberation, we adopted a framework from education: the funds-of-knowledge approach. The notion of funds of knowledge was developed as a way for educators in multicultural classrooms to identify and tap into the unique skills, abilities, stories, and traditions within students’ families which relate to curriculum (Esteban-Guitart et al., 2020). This approach posits that in dominant cultural contexts, such as U.S. classrooms, students from marginalized backgrounds are viewed as deficient if they do not have access to the types of knowledge most highly valued in the Western educational model (often linear, rational, and decontextualized). Applying this model to public participation, it follows that participants without prior familiarity and comfort using rational forms of reasoning would be limited in how they engage in decision-making bodies. We maintain that the modes of communication embraced in public policy conversations indicate the kinds of knowledge valued by those systems. Thus, we advocate expanding the types of knowledge and reasoning valued in the public sphere, rather than simply replacing rational modes.

Debate about the accessibility of deliberative discourse for marginalized groups has been cross-disciplinary. Liggett (2014) proposed applying deliberative democracy in English language learning (ELL) classrooms to support students with immigrant backgrounds by exploring their diverse lived experiences while connecting with certain universal values that encourage healthy democratic dialogue. In an inclusive classroom, these experiences, when activated, serve as an entry point for contextualizing academic learning and practicing democratic exchange. Liggett acknowledged that the rational rhetorical style of deliberative practices often poses challenges for ELL students and should be complemented with other forms of discourse, such as storytelling and silence. Still, in response to Liggett, De La Vega (2014) contested the notion that most ELL students can adopt deliberative practices within a context of institutional discrimination against their native languages. In De La Vega’s view, assuming that emerging bilingual students will automatically be able to express positions and reason confidently with their peers ignores the crucial step in which students build confidence using linguistic skills to confront systemic power, privilege, and oppression. This process is more complex and iterative than simply deliberating in multiple languages; it requires valuing students’ existing knowledge and scaffolding learning to instill a strong sense of identity and belonging within students who are otherwise disadvantaged in English-dominated spaces.

The contrast between Liggett (2014) and De La Vega (2014) highlights key questions about the nature of self-expression in settings typified by unequal social and political

conditions. One scholar sees individual social differences as a logical starting point where students can practice productive dialogue; another sees particular differences (i.e., stages of language acquisition) as embedded within structural power imbalances that must be addressed before deliberative exchange is possible. Liggett's position highlights a common, albeit implicit, institutional expectation in administration—that all individuals should articulate their experience within the discursive frameworks of dominant culture. Accordingly, we contend that in deliberation, participants are expected to accommodate the designed participation norms of a given deliberation. While it may be strategic for participants to figure out what modes of engagement are most impactful (Meléndez & Martinez-Cosio, 2021), practitioners hold most of the power over what norms of engagement are valued. Therefore, if deliberation practitioners wish to create inclusive spaces, they cannot ask only certain individuals (such as immigrants or other non-dominant groups) to modify their verbal expression to be heard; instead, they must intentionally design a culture—a participatory space—that validates multiple forms of expression.

Designing such participatory spaces requires practitioners to examine the role identity plays in shaping the types of knowledge that members of the public can activate in public discourse, and how their design decisions support or inhibit certain types of knowledge expression. The influence of identity in participatory settings has garnered more interest in recent years as scholars have highlighted ways that civic participation shapes individuals' identities and how those identities influence civic spaces (Abrego, 2011; Campbell, 2005; Hafer & Ran, 2016). Through engagement in the design spaces, new social identities emerge (or are allowed to be expressed) as participants position themselves in relation to other members and identity groups (Hafer & Ran, 2016).

For immigrants, whether state-sponsored citizens or not (Appadurai, 2001; Ellison, 1997), the ability to make claims in civic spaces—that is, to make demands of government—is a critical means of expanding citizenship (Abrego, 2011; Meléndez, 2021; Meléndez & Martinez-Cosio 2021; Flores, 2003). As Bloemraad (2018) argued, “The implicit mechanism by which citizenship has value is through the power of access” (p. 9). Access extends to participants' ability to expand and co-construct new social identities while participating because “the nature of transformation in identity is contingent upon the type of interaction experienced” (Campbell, 2005, p. 691). This logic, which is foundational in both education and social psychology, suggests a link between participants' identity development and their ability to express those identities meaningfully in deliberative spaces (Meléndez & Martinez-Cosio, 2019; 2021). Additionally, and perhaps most importantly for public administrators, spaces that support the development and actualization of citizenship can also alter immigrants' relationship with government.

While much recent research has explored how particular experiences of participation shape identity formation, this article focuses primarily on the relative salience and expression of preexisting demographic identities. Constructivist views of identity affirm that ethnicity, for example, is “an identity that can become salient at specific moments in time (as opposed to a fixed trait that is monotonically influential in people's political decisions)” (Thomson, 2018, p. 68). Further, individuals embody multiple identities in every social interaction, and these layers of identity become activated at different times

depending on a variety of contextual factors (Ramarajan, 2014). For many social psychology scholars, one's ability to balance multiple identities relies on activating various "buckets of knowledge" that are tied to different concepts of self (Ramarajan, 2014)—suggesting a natural agreement with the funds-of-knowledge approach.

Debates about citizenship, belonging, and identity in U.S. political and cultural discourse have significantly intensified in recent decades due to increasing transnational migration (Papastergiadis, 2000; Rocco, 2004). Yet, until recently, studies of civic participation among the largest immigrant populations in the United States—Latinos and Asians—have been largely confined to one-off or one-dimensional activities, such as voting, running for office, and affiliation with partisan identities (Price et al., 2011). A more qualitative body of scholarship has investigated how immigrant identities and "cultural citizenships" are embedded in political, cultural, and civic systems and are deeply intertwined with racism, exclusion, and marginalization (Price et al., 2011). For individuals with marginalized identities, enacting dominant social norms becomes a method for gaining power and respect in spaces defined by the cultural values of dominant groups. For example, as Young explains, replicating the speech patterns and tone of voice of White male professional culture is a commonly recognized marker of an individual's familiarity with and adherence to dominant cultural values (Young, 2000, p. 39). Diverging from this discursive norm can easily result in the dismissal or devaluation of individuals' contributions. Negotiating demographic identities—and understanding how those identities inform knowledge funds available as reference points—is key to explaining how immigrants engage in policy deliberations.

Methods

The Oregon immigrants research project

This study utilized data collected in a larger research project that analyzed the experiences of immigrants serving on public boards and commissions in Oregon (Meléndez et al., 2021). Initially, we conducted online research of jurisdictions across Oregon to identify the various decision-making bodies across the state. We created a statewide inventory of relevant commissions, committees, and boards—referred to as the "board inventory"—which captured information related to geography, type of jurisdiction, topical focus, availability of board roster information, and, importantly, decision-making authority.

We used similar methods to determine the diversity of the decision-making bodies. When the demographics of board members were not readily available through public websites, we sent a short survey to the person(s) identified as the staff contact for the body, requesting that they provide basic demographic information of board members. The demographic data we gathered populated our second inventory of individuals who identified as foreign-born or second-generation immigrants currently serving on an inventoried board as a member of the public, not as an elected or staff representative—referred to as the "member inventory."

For the purposes of our study, we defined a *first-generation immigrant* as an individual who migrated from another country, including refugees and asylum seekers, regardless of age, status, or time in the country, and a *second-generation immigrant* as the child of one or more first-generation immigrants. We then conducted 46 short, semi-

structured interviews (Weiss, 1995) with those members in our inventory. Participants represented diverse countries of origin, race/ethnicity, and genders. All interviews were transcribed² and then analyzed using discourse and content-analysis methods (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Saldaña, 2011).³

Knowledge and influence study

Two research questions guided our analysis of the 46 coded interview transcripts: (1) To what extent do immigrants foreground their lived experience *vs.* technical experience during board service? (2) How do these forms of knowledge expression influence immigrants' decision making, as described by participants? To explore these questions, we first examined the distribution of codes describing participants' contributions related to their lived experiences *vs.* professional, academic, or technical training. Three groups emerged from the data based on the extent to which participants discussed utilizing these types of knowledge. We then conducted coding queries to sort transcripts into each case group.

In the first group, we searched for combinations of codes including "lived experience," "personal identity," and "motivation—personal impact." These codes indicated speech about participants' personal life experiences that were not connected to professional or academic experiences. *Personal impact* refers to instances when participants saw themselves as directly affected by the issues address by the board. In most cases, we selected passages also coded to "individual role" to differentiate when they spoke about personal experiences related directly to their role on the board. Sorting the data with this combination made it possible to identify participants who saw their lived experience, their personal identities, and the personal impact of their board service as relevant to their role within the group.

To populate the second group, we conducted a similar analysis using codes related to technical expertise. These included "professional experience," "academic experience," "expertise," and "motivation—skills." In this case, the motivation code was used when interview subjects talked about their decision to join a board based on specific abilities they felt they could contribute. The expertise code was used when participants discussed skills acquired primarily through professional or academic experience. As in the first case group, we chose transcripts that showed these forms of experience to be linked directly to participants' concept of their roles on each board. We note that it's *impossible* (not simply limiting) to rely only on either personal experience OR rational training as one's fund of knowledge.

The third group included interview subjects who spoke about both lived and technical expertise shaping their contributions to and role on the board. Transcripts in this group needed to include passages coded to a combination of the first two categories: at least one reference coded to both "individual role" and one of the personal experience codes (i.e., "lived experience," "personal identity," or "motivation—personal impact") as well as one reference coded to both "individual role" and one of the technical expertise codes ("professional experience," "academic experience," "expertise," or "motivation—skills"). A fourth group comprised the remaining 28 interviews, which did not include reference to either lived experience or technical expertise as relating to their role and

Table 1. Experience group examples.

Group	Example reference #1
Group 1: Drew primarily from identity-based and experiential funds of knowledge during board participation	<i>And I do think ... the fact that I'm not a U.S. citizen, so I'm, you know, I can't vote for the people that are in the offices that make some of these decisions, I do <u>bring a different perspective</u>. Also, just as a person who English is a second language, I have a different perspective ... that I was able to share with the people around the table.</i> —Human Rights Commission member
Group 2: Drew primarily from technical funds of knowledge during board participation	<i>So, I think ... I brought that, together with my <u>professional experience in urban design</u> has been very relevant to the whole business of public open space, the continuity between formal parks and the public realm of streets and squares and the gaps between buildings.</i> —Parks Board member
Group 3: Drew from relatively even combination of experiential and technical funds of knowledge during board participation	<i>In the sense of, like, being part of my identity. And also, <u>I'm Black, but I didn't grow up here so I have a different perspective and expectations about racial equity than most of the Americans.</u></i> AND <i>There's like this conference here in [the city], the tree summit, and one of the city staff associated to the board, asking me to do a presentation in a conference and probably asked me that because I'm a student. So, I did a presentation about one of my papers ... <u>maybe because of my professional background.</u></i> —Parks Board member

contributions. These transcripts were not analyzed further, yet we do report broader themes and areas for future study.

Between four and eight transcripts were selected for each of the three case groups. Table 1 includes example excerpts that were used to assign participants to Groups 1, 2, and 3. The underlined phrases denote linguistic cues that were indicative of each case group.

After selecting the three case groups, each transcript was then analyzed for how the participant discussed their influence over decision making in their jurisdiction. Because data were initially collected from bodies with a wide variety of authorities—from purely advisory (e.g., public health advisory committees) to governing (e.g., school boards)—on bodies with formal decision-making authority were disqualified at this stage in the analysis. For this study, we were interested in the experience of participants serving on advisory boards because there was more variation in the extent to which they influenced actual decisions within their governing jurisdictions.

For each transcript, the “external influence” code was used to determine the extent to which participants saw their participation as influential. “External influence” refers to the ability of the board *as a whole* to contribute to wider community conversations or decision making by the jurisdiction it advises. We ran queries for this code within each interview transcript for Groups 1–3 and analyzed how each participant understood their influence over decision making. We used a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *weak*, 2 = *fairly weak*, 3 = *mixed*, 4 = *fairly strong*, and 5 = *strong*) to broadly describe the level of influence and impact each interview participant described (Table 2).

Table 2. Influence ratings and indicators.

Rating	Example Reference
Weak: Described very low power over decisions; used to “check a box”	<i>In terms of did we influence anything? No, we didn't. We gave [a statement] but ... the decision was kind of already made. With this sit-lie ordinance ... it's kind of the same thing. The mayor has already made his decision, I mean the sit-lie is coming from his office, you know? And so, are we going to make an impact? I don't think so. But I think it is worth it to, to show people that, hey, we're here. We're listening. We're not going to just keep quiet.</i> —Human Rights Commission member
Fairly weak: Described limited power but influence over select decisions or conversations	<i>I mean, the City Council, so it's an advisory board, so it doesn't have any actual meat and teeth and power. We don't make decisions that ... [have] immediate effect on anyone. We make decisions to make recommendations to the people who make decisions at the city.</i> —Human Rights Commission member
Mixed: Described feelings of both stronger and weaker influence	<i>So, we can make requests, but we can't make demands. So, we don't get to make those decisions, but we get to form either an approval or disapproval of the budget. And pass on specific concerns to council when they go through their formal review.</i> —Budget Committee member
Fairly strong: Described some impact over broader conversations or the agency they advised, but emphasized the limitations of that power	<i>I think you want to make sure that they're meaningful, that it's not just for the sake of having a group or checking a box. But at least my experience with this particular group is that, and then the other commissions that we interact with touch a lot of different needs within ... the state ... whether it's education, public health, the environment—I mean, they all intersect. And so, it is I think an important part of just civil society, and I'm grateful they do it here.</i> —Commission on Asian and Pacific Islander Affairs member
Strong: Described a high level of confidence in having power over decisions and impact on community conversations	<i>So, the agency develops their strategic plan. We played a really important role in that. I mean, at the end of the day, we have to approve it. Right. So, we approved it, but at every meeting, they would give us an update ... on, like, the consultants that they hired, public participation process that that went through in order to get the information. And so, yeah, so we played a really instrumental role in developing the housing, the state's housing strategic plan.</i> —Oregon Housing Stability Council member

Researcher's positionality

The second author (and principal investigator of the larger research project) is a first-generation immigrant. His personal identity and experiences as an immigrant—the fears and hesitations around engaging in claims-making processes, the challenges of learning a new language, and the role of formal education in teaching him about rational modes of participation—were central to his own *multivoicedness*.⁴ His multivoicedness informed the overarching research design, the training of research assistants carrying out the interviews, and the study's layered analytical approach that sought to reveal the nuance and complexity of engaging in civic activity as an immigrant. The first author is a nonimmigrant White woman and former student of the second author. She has

Table 3. Distribution of influence ratings.

Group	Influence ratings
Group 1: Drew primarily from identity-based and experiential funds of knowledge during board participation	Weak: 0 Fairly weak: 1 Mixed: 0 Fairly strong: 2 Strong: 0 Unsure: 1 Total: 4
Group 2: Drew primarily from technical funds of knowledge during board participation	Weak: 1 Fairly weak: 0 Mixed: 3 Fairly strong: 2 Strong: 0 Unsure: 0 Total: 6
Group 3: Drew from relatively even combination of experiential and technical funds of knowledge during board participation	Weak: 0 Fairly weak: 1 Mixed: 1 Fairly strong: 2 Strong: 3 Unsure: 1 Total: 8

benefited from significant class, race, and educational privilege in her life and recognizes how deconstructing the rational ideal is an act of decentering systems of oppression from which she has also benefited. She is humbled by helping carry out the broader research project designed and coordinated by the second author and applies these lessons in her work as a practitioner of innovative deliberative democracy programs. Both authors approach research as an endeavor that should benefit the communities that comprise the study—in particular, communities that are often absent from decision-making processes but whose members are impacted most by those decisions. Findings from the overarching research project have been shared with all decision-making bodies inventoried in the study and interviewed participants, in addition to provided pro bono consulting to jurisdictions seeking to act on our policy recommendations (Meléndez et al., 2021).

Findings

Distribution of influence ratings

Eighteen of the 46 interviews were sorted into Groups 1, 2, or 3. This subset of interviews revealed several trends about how participants drew on different funds of knowledge to influence decision making in their jurisdictions. It also illuminated the many ways members of these bodies understood the meaning of influence and what kinds of influence were most important in their work. The following section discusses the distribution of transcripts and patterns of influence that emerged within each of the three knowledge groups.

The distribution of influence ratings in each group was quite wide; each of the three had more than one member who described having weak influence and more than one who described having strong influence. However, some notable trends emerged when we examined ratios of interview participants between each influence rating compared

with other groups. Table 3 demonstrates the distribution of interviewees within each ranking for Groups 1–3 and reiterates how each of the three groups were defined. It is important to emphasize that participants in Groups 1 and 2 probably did not exclusively utilize those communicative strategies in their broader participation; however, in our discourse analysis of the interview transcripts, individuals were classified based on which strategies and funds of knowledge were *foregrounded*.

Our findings expand previous evidence that individuals participate in public decision making using a variety of information types and modes of expression. Whereas the traditional deliberative democratic ideal imagines a rational exchange of ideas grounded in objective evidence gathering, the immigrant members interviewed in this study reported more varied conceptualizations of their roles and discursive contributions. For example, participants in the first group—those who drew primarily on experiential funds of knowledge—were divided relatively evenly between the *fairly weak*, *fairly strong*, and *unsure* categories. The member who reported fairly weak influence described discrete instances of “big wins” where decision makers followed the recommendations of their board. However, they emphasized that the body was purely advisory and that decision makers were not obligated to follow their recommendations. This discrepancy highlights a recurrent theme in the interviews: Having influence on decisions did not necessarily correspond to a perceived sense of being influential.

Members who reported *fairly strong* influence in Group 1 tended to emphasize their ability to shape policy narratives beyond discrete decisions. One described their board as “outspoken” and claimed some responsibility for increasing the frequency and intensity of public conversations about immigration. Another interviewee indicated that their board’s recommendations had been taken seriously by the decision-making agency and noted a ripple effect from their conversations within the community. Although a small sample, these two participants assigned considerable importance to influencing policy narratives and impacting community conversations about topics. Yet, the participants in Group 1 spoke little about exerting influence over specific policy decisions made by their host agencies. It is also worth noting that the small size of Group 1 (4) compared to the other groups may directly imply that participants are less comfortable foregrounding their lived experience, as opposed to rational knowledge funds, in public decision-making.

That participants who drew primarily on lived experience were most likely to claim indirect influence (e.g., on cultural conversations) suggests a lack of access to the forms of rationalist thinking that enable participants to analyze the ways bureaucratic decisions are made. While these forms of influence are no less important than tangible policy outcomes, some participants may lack opportunities to exercise formal policy influence due to the limited funds of knowledge they can draw on during service. For instance, the two participants in the preceding examples cited fewer instances of their policy recommendations being adopted by decision makers, despite their perceived community influence.

Group 2—those who drew primarily on rational funds of knowledge—comprised the highest number of interviewees who described a *mixed* level of influence (50%). One human rights commission member who oscillated between believing and not believing they had influence stated:

In some cases, yes. In some cases, no. It's just depended on the situation. And ... a lot things go into decision making by the city. They have the city council, city council meeting We've had a conversation with the mayor about that. So, in terms of things like that, yes, but sometimes ... no. For various reasons [known] to the city, which is of course understandable. And we may not always agree with it, but we know that we do the best we can.

This participant demonstrates the kind of rational reasoning typically taught in Western educational systems whereby one makes claims and supports those claims with evidence. Despite the conflicting nature of this evidence, the preceding quotation exemplifies the tendency of members of this group to discuss influence in the context of rational evaluative frameworks rather than more intuitive processes.

Others in the *mixed* category reported similar dynamics in which their boards influenced certain actors or secured allies, but those successes did not always translate into policy change. The three participants in this category discussed the role of relationships in determining whether they successfully influenced decisions. In the preceding quote, the participant depicts the conversation with the mayor as a win in itself, contrasted with the loss of not always agreeing with the city's policy actions. Another participant discussed the host agency representative who sat on their board; the extent to which that person supported the board's work determined how effective board members could be in impacting decisions. This comment underlines that this member's perceived influence depended on factors external to their group's political power.

Some members in Group 2 also discussed their board's ability to influence broader conversations by surfacing important topics, even though this did not always correlate with direct policy impact. These participants described patterns similar to those exhibited by Group 1; however, they were categorized as *mixed* due to the distinction they drew between influencing policy conversations and influencing real policy outcomes. Such comments suggest that members of Group 2 – participants who drew on rational funds of knowledge – were more likely to notice both wins and structural challenges in accessing pathways to influence. Their reports of alignment with policy changes were not substantially lower than those in Group 1, but the ways they described that influence gave more weight to the official advisory nature of their boards rather than to actual changes in policy. Thus, engaging rationally in decision-making systems did not necessarily increase members' perceived influence.

Those who saw their influence as *fairly strong* in Group 2 placed significant emphasis on influencing key players and shaping conversations about policy topics. More so than those in the *mixed* category, they also thought that the agencies they advised gave them a degree of authority in making policy decisions. They linked their ability to skillfully express their worldviews, ask questions, and demonstrate their subject-matter expertise to having influence over their host agencies' decisions. One audit committee member said:

I felt like at least two of the members on the ... committee are fairly *experienced* with finance and so we were leading the questioning. And so, I would think that the city council members would be influenced by us. In this case, because we were more of the experts than even they were ... I think it depends on who the citizen members are, right? If I could see that—if they are not as *experienced* then they wouldn't influence the city council members as much right. But with the *experience* that we have, I think we are influencing them [emphasis added].

Here, “experience” refers to technical and professional knowledge; the speaker self-identifies as an expert in finance. This quote exemplifies that participants with rational funds of knowledge sometimes saw themselves as even more knowledgeable than decisionmakers in their agency, leading to a unique sense of power and influence. Still, the two participants in this rating category pointed out that their impact was directly tied to how well they advocated for their personal views. Rather than having inherent decision-making control, their boards were influential *if* members were capable of advocating for their views and expertise.

One budget committee member described using verbal skills to exert influence, even when a member’s technical knowledge surpassed the decision makers’ knowledge:

If you’re really trying to set priorities and it’s verbal jujitsu, ... you have to make the emotional, the logical, the human case—you have to appeal to them to agree to a resource change if you want to change ... a resource plan proposal.

This comment highlights the importance of knowing how to make a persuasive argument that decisionmakers find convincing. Although not specific to any one type of training or education, such argumentation skills are part of traditional technical and professional education. As such, *mixed* and *fairly strong* ranked members of Group 2 had greater fluency in rational modes of thinking and speaking and appeared to be better equipped to critically assess their influence and employ argumentative tactics for leveraging their power.

Hence, in addition to utilizing rational logic more skillfully, participants in Group 2 more frequently demonstrated an ability to “play the game” of government decision making, citing awareness of bureaucratic mechanisms and power-building strategies that extended beyond their immediate group. For example, they spoke more about alliance building with key players as a way to strengthen their influence. Others described strategically selecting topics based on their political feasibility.

Group 3—those members who utilized a combination of experiential and technical funds of knowledge—skewed most heavily toward greater influence. Two thirds of members in this group described having *fairly strong* or *strong* influence, whereas only one third fell into the *fairly weak*, *mixed*, or *unsure* rating categories. Those who reported strong influence described highly collaborative relationships between members and host agencies. One member said, “At the end of the day, we had to approve [the state’s affordable housing strategic plan],” noting that the agency’s final decision was contingent on approval from this advisory board. Though the board was technically only advisory, the host agency apparently did not move forward with decisions until it had full buy-in and had workshopped its plans with the board. Notably, all three members who reported *strong* influence served on statewide bodies. One member of a commission on Hispanic affairs described their work as a resource to aid the governor’s existing priorities on diversity, equity, and inclusion:

Well, we’re getting invited to more spaces than we ever have before. I think that the governor is taking our commission very seriously and sees it as a resource to ... the work that her and her staff are doing.

Another member (of a commission on Asian and Pacific Islander affairs) described their influence as a combination of direct policy impact, testifying on behalf of certain

bills, and building alliances with powerful public officials. They specifically tied this external influence to the funds of knowledge they accessed during participation:

I saw how influential ... it is to be able to testify in front of legislators on a specific bill. I feel like with my other colleagues, my other commissioners—you not only have that commissioner title and how ... that carries the weight, but I think my lived experience coupled with my master's degree. Right, I think all that together made it even more compelling when you're ... testifying in support of certain bills.

For this speaker, the combination of professional and technical knowledge as well as lived experience provides a multitude of tools for influencing decision makers. Albeit a small sample, participants on statewide commissions noted that this combination of tools resulted in greater external influence.

Members of Group 3 who reported *fairly strong* influence discussed some of the same trends we observed in the other two groups: their boards could raise important topics and influence policy *if* they had the right political alliances and advocacy skills. Although the members of this rating category in Group 3 had experienced instances of real impact, this depended on who was in power and whether their priorities aligned with board members' interests. In the cases of *mixed*, *fairly weak*, and *unsure* influence, members described being heard but not necessarily exerting influence over decisions or in their communities more broadly.

Overall, the groups varied in their reported perceptions of influence. Most members of Group 3 who described the strongest influence sat on statewide boards and commissions. More than other groups, these individuals appeared to be confident leveraging both their personal lived experiences and technical professional backgrounds to influence state plans and policy decisions. Members of Group 1 were more likely to report *fairly strong* levels of influence, often describing their impact in terms of influencing broader policy narratives and raising important topics that might not otherwise have been addressed by their boards. Members of Group 2 reported the most mixed level of influence of all three groups. While they reported relatively similar levels of influence over policy decisions, as a group they were more likely to emphasize that they had no *actual* authority over their host agencies, which skewed their group's distribution toward the *mixed* rating. The different focus on what counted as proof of evidence is noteworthy. Since our analysis was based on self-reporting, we note the limitations of either over- or under-emphasizing influence based on factors of reasoning, imposter syndrome, and other variations in perceptions and expectations.

Addressing the outliers

The 28 interviewees who were not classified in our three study groups certainly employed various forms of knowledge expression in their participation, and their exclusion from the primary analysis does not indicate a lack of communicative strategy. Many discussed the communicative norms of their boards in a general way and did not reference their *own* communicative practices. Our decision to narrow the study sample to participants' own accounts of their personal expressions sought to avoid highly subjective, secondhand characterizations of others' contributions. However, a brief

reflection on how these 28 participants described communicative norms more broadly is worthwhile, pointing to opportunities for future research.

Some of the norms they referenced pertained to others' strategies around argumentation, professionalism, productivity, and persuasion. Regarding argumentation, participants used phrases, such as "bouncing egos," "[becoming] pretty punchy in meetings," and "a lot of heated arguments." One participant commended fellow members for being "well spoken, well read, educated professionals." One group talked about the tension between "productive" conversation that moves toward a goal and "emotional" conversation, which hinders that goal. Others discussed modes of persuasion they felt were useful (e.g., "attracting as opposed to chasing"). Such strategies reflected the kinds of knowledge and expression board members saw as worthwhile or not in others.

Additionally, most of these "outlier" interviewees talked about their board's culture of participation, which they often linked directly to communicative practices they observed. Most discussed their board culture as a mix of formal—highly structured and procedural (most often following Robert's Rules of Order)—and informal—discussion-based, participatory, and oftentimes more relational. See Meléndez and Hoff for additional analysis and findings on the connection between board culture and communicative practices (2023), which goes beyond the scope of our study.

Discussion

Applying a funds-of-knowledge approach to public administration contexts revealed generative findings indicating that immigrant members of public decision-making bodies draw on diverse types of knowledge and experience when engaging in participatory spaces. In our study, participatory spaces that supported access to these knowledge funds in turn shaped how individuals perceived their influence over government decision making. This research contributes new insights to the ongoing exploration of Habermasian ideals of communicative rationality in administration theory. It builds on critiques of the notion that individuals engage in public discourse according to purely rationalist ideals. It also adds rich qualitative evidence encouraging administrators to consider what funds of knowledge are valued within decision-making spaces. By elucidating these communicative trends, government actors can create the conditions for real policy co-production in which immigrant board members have significant influence over policy. They can ensure that the kinds of information individuals have access to are embraced and valued regardless of those individuals' ability to contribute according to rationalist discursive norms.

We acknowledge the limitations of our study, given the low number of participants included in each of the groups, and the overall dataset. Our findings are not generalizable; rather, they should be viewed as generative, inviting researchers to ask additional questions and practitioners to investigate their own design decisions. Due to the qualitative nature of our interviews, complete data on all participants' communicative contributions were not captured. Our findings, in conjunction with the literature, point to a need for additional research surveying greater numbers of immigrant participants which should also include analysis of participation in practice.

Situated knowledge expression: Rationality, funds of knowledge, and influence

We argue that the funds-of-knowledge approach is an appropriate framework for analyzing how administration theory is practiced. Just as dominant norms of participation in U.S. public education privilege certain forms of expression over others, spaces for public policy discourse are constructed according to notions of neutrality, objectivity, professionalism, and efficiency which restrict certain participants from drawing on the full spectrum of their life experiences in their participation. We conceptualize this research as part of an ongoing investigation of Campbell's (2005) claim that, too often, public administrators "discredit and disqualify localized or specialized forms of knowledge when they do not fit into our model of deliberative democracy... built and sustained upon the familiar model of the rational, good citizen" (p. 696). Deconstructing the "rational, good citizen" requires ongoing and intentional effort.

The identification of participants in our study who saw their roles as defined by their lived experience (almost equal to the number whose role was defined by rational experience) provides preliminary support to claims by feminist and Latino/a/x scholars that relational, subjective, and narrative-based expression are common modes of participation that require attention and consideration (Braaten, 1995; Pajnik, 2006; Young, 2000). Further, it suggests that this mode of contribution is common among immigrants as a specific demographic group. Drawing on scholarship on the use of storytelling among marginalized identity groups (De La Vega, 2014; Young, 2000), this study presents some of the first data on how a heterogeneous group of first- and second-generation immigrants employed these forms of knowledge expression on public boards and commissions. By conducting layered qualitative analysis of ongoing, meaningful participatory experiences, we expand the often-oversimplified research on civic participation among immigrants (Price et al., 2011), highlighting these individuals' unique contributions to policy discourse in the public sphere.

Our findings also contribute new information to the far less studied topic of policy responsiveness to various kinds of knowledge and expression. We note that problems arise when certain outcomes of participation are not available to all participants. Still, these findings reveal the differential quality of engagement among those with training to engage in such systems. When participatory spaces preference techno-rational forms of reasoning and argumentation, these practices reinforce norms within public administration implying that evidence-based reasoning and rational argumentation are, by default, superior mechanisms for policy creation (Triantafillou, 2015).

Ultimately, our data support widespread claims that those with more developed skills in reasoning, argumentation, networking, and political maneuvering are more likely to benefit from deliberative decision-making systems (Bruns Ali & Ganapati, 2020; Paterson & Scala, 2017; Young, 2000). Qualities, such as articulateness and dispassionateness, according to Young (2000), center the "speech culture" of well-educated people—modeled on White, middle-class men—trained to disconnect reason and emotion. Even if these modes of expression were not explicitly valued *more* by government agencies, study participants who also had access to rational modes of thinking and deliberation were the most confident in assessing and wielding their power over decisions.

Further, members with the greatest number of available “funds” were best positioned to feel confident in their contributions and influence. This aligns with the funds-of-knowledge approach since those participants had the most tools at their disposal to match the values of the setting. Recall the member of a statewide human rights commission, when testifying before the state legislature, shared about both their lived experience as a refugee and their professional experience working in refugee resettlement organizations. They maximized their credibility not only by drawing on diverse forms of expertise, but also through rational strategizing about what combination of testimony would be most impactful in that context. This combination of expertise may be even more critical when advocating for positions with which those in power may have little to no experience.

Following a long tradition of scholarship on identity expression in the public sphere, particularly among marginalized identity groups, such as immigrants, our study drew from theories of identity, belonging, and their intricate dependence on knowledge expression (Papastergiadis, 2000; Rocco, 2004; Thomson, 2018). We argue that participants’ ability to constructively develop identities in participatory spaces connects directly to whether those governing institutions value their life experiences.

Aiming for equity: Addressing knowledge access and communicative privilege

We maintain that administrators, drawing on notions of activist deliberation and identity formation, should proactively balance access to different funds of knowledge in participatory spaces. They must discard neutrality and apply differential treatment based on the levels of privilege participants bring with them into the room. We believe that such strategies help improve the responsiveness of government actors to the diverse forms of knowledge participants contribute to deliberative participation. Admittedly, this strategy, which some might characterize as empowering (Cruikshank, 1999), is not enough to change structural deficiencies that over centuries of policy making have prevented underrepresented communities from accessing and wielding power. Yet, we caution against tautological arguments that ignore how such destructive policies have been made possible by privileging only rational funds of knowledge—and by former privileged members of the same types of decision-making bodies included in our study. As such, our study lends credence to the hypothesis that if both of these variables are diversified, more equitable policy outcomes might be possible (Meléndez & Hoff, 2023). Although, providing spaces for identity formation and civic belonging is important, public participation should also be measured by whether it delivers policy decisions that result in real changes in peoples’ lives.

We hold that the kinds of information participants activate and utilize to inform public policy—rational expertise, traditional and community-based knowledge, lived experience, culture, relationships, etc.—are products of both participant expectations and institutional values. Scholars studying interactions between deliberative democracy and learning have argued that achieving equitable access to communicative confidence not only is a matter of learning to articulate one’s views according to dominant norms, but also requires a process of acknowledging and addressing dynamics of power and privilege within participatory spaces (De La Vega, 2014; Meléndez, 2021; Meléndez &

Martinez-Cosio, 2019, 2021; Meléndez & Parker, 2019). Deliberation scholars have also noted that deliberative theory that lacks analysis of unequal political conditions will continue to produce the greatest benefit for those who already hold the most power—in our case, those capable of performing the communicative norms of dominant culture. However, to reject deliberation entirely absolves its practitioners from developing the tools necessary for achieving the equal social conditions on which their theoretical ideal is based. The methods needed to produce equal conditions will not likely adhere to rational, deliberative norms; rather, a more heavy-handed approach to balancing power must be adopted. Fung (2005) suggested the following practical strategies for deliberative activists:

This admission, in turn should lead them to accept, and perhaps endorse, measures to mitigate these advantages in public deliberations. Such a program of deliberative affirmative action might include structured facilitation to ensure open and fair communication and provisions that allow weaker parties to move first in setting agendas or offering proposals. (p. 407)

As Fung (2005) suggested, an “activist” deliberative approach can advance goals of social equality by naming and addressing underlying powers and privileges that members bring to deliberative spaces. Just as De La Vega (2014) suggested that ELL students must undergo a process of uncovering oppressive dynamics against their native languages before engaging authentically in deliberative discourse, decision-making bodies should make explicit their underlying norms as a first step towards equalizing power. Our recommendations align with these scholars and many others who argue for equity-driven approaches to balancing power in deliberative spaces. Administrators cannot simply increase deliberation between diverse players; they must also investigate the knowledge and experience those individuals possess and design systems that elevate that knowledge.

Conclusion

By centering the experiences of immigrants serving on Oregon’s public decision-making bodies, our research illuminates the degree to which immigrants foregrounded their lived experience *vs.* rational experience during board service (though only four participants in our dataset explicitly shared that they did so). As described earlier, we found that individuals who utilized a combination of lived experience and rational contributions reported the highest levels of perceived impact on policy outcomes and conversations. Thus, our study provides generative evidence of how forms of knowledge expression influence immigrants’ decision-making processes, as described by participants.

This research adds nuanced testimonials to an ongoing debate about how to design inclusive spaces for public policy participation. By introducing the funds-of-knowledge approach, we offer a new lens for analyzing how individuals’ contributions to policy decisions are either supported or stymied depending on various institutional expectations and norms. However, we also note that by focusing on adults in non-school settings, our study adds layers of complexity to what may count as a fund of knowledge in a public setting. As such, we call on other researchers and practitioners to further

investigate how the funds-of-knowledge approach holds up or needs to be expanded in the civic sphere.

As administrators continue to design spaces for public discourse and scholars continue to assess the implications of communicative rationality, we encourage a renewed deliberative turn that embraces personal, contextual, relational, and subjective knowledge. Reinforcing ideals of rationalist discourse, technical expertise, and exclusively evidence-driven policy obscures the potentially transformative possibilities that participatory governance offers—to draw on diverse perspectives that decision makers lack (Hafer & Ran, 2016). Only when individuals can draw on the full complexity of their experiences and identities will participatory governance be truly *by* and *for* all people.

Notes

1. We acknowledge that though *decision-making bodies* do make decisions and policy recommendations, most of the bodies in this study represented advisory groups that have no formal, *binding* decision-making authority over policy.
2. One of the interviews was conducted and analyzed in Spanish.
3. For further details about participant selection and preliminary interview analysis, see Melendez et al. (2021).
4. *Multivoicedness* refers to the multiplicity of individuals' experiences that have shaped them and which they bring to a context (Engeström, 1999).

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