

# Citizen engagement: Arenas for interaction and participation

Anna Zhelnina, PhD (Sociology)

Postdoctoral researcher, Helsinki Institute of Urban  
and Regional Studies (Urbaria), Helsinki University

# What this presentation is (not) about

- YES
  - Principles of engagement, reasons for lack thereof
  - What enables meaningful civic engagement?
  - Why people (don't) attend/ engage with events
- NOT
  - Toolkits of engagement: co-creation and engagement techniques

# Players and Arenas approach: strategic interactionism

- Arenas:  
interactive spaces where decisions and other outcomes are at stake.
- Players:  
individuals or groups of individuals with a goal and a stake
  - Compound players  
social movements, neighborhood associations, non-profits;  
Corporations, governmental institutions
  - Players as arenas  
internal discussions and decision-making processes within the group

*What is at stake in the arenas?*

**“Future-making”** takes place in interactive arenas

- change of values and visions
- decisions about the next steps
- new rules and principles of action
- allocation of resources toward new goals

# PLAYERS

- Have values, principles, goals, cultures
  - Including compound, collective players (corporations have "cultures," movements have "tastes in tactics")
- Some are more, others less fixed, and can change in interaction
- Have internal differences, contradictions, and debates



Associations  
Social movements  
Nonprofits  
Informal networks and communities



*Shared living environments, spaces, futures, etc.*



Governmental bodies  
City officials  
City departments



Companies  
Entrepreneurs

# ARENAS

Encounters in community gardens, courtyards, public rituals, social media, houses of worship, etc.

## Formal Civic Arenas

- Community Board 4 in Queens, New York, USA during a “majority minority” transition (after 1975 immigration reform)
- “old-timers” (white) and immigrant “newcomers” in civic politics
- Outcomes: a shared vision of the “quality of life” in Queens

*“Without a community board there would have been no public forum at which white, black, Latin American, and Asian leaders had a place to interact.” (p. 769)*

Sanjek, Roger. 2000. “Color-Full before Color Blind: The Emergence of Multiracial Neighborhood Politics in Queens, New York City.” *American Anthropologist* 102 (4): 762–72.



## Informal Civic Arenas

- Bus rides on their way to and from work, Los Angeles, USA
- Marginalized women, immigrant domestic workers
- Outcomes: Information, skills, confidence, emotions, solidarity, plans for action

*“They constantly mentioned that before the event, the march was present everywhere; everybody talked about it. Missing it was impossible and unthinkable.” (p. 341).*



Boudreau, Julie-Anne, Nathalie Boucher, and Marilena Liguori. 2009. “Taking the Bus Daily and Demonstrating on Sunday: Reflections on the Formation of Political Subjectivity in an Urban World.” *City* 13 (2–3): 336–46.

# Participation techniques: arena creation

\*\*\* Please select the relevant options in the filter categories below to receive a compilation of appropriate activities on the right.

## Filters

Title contains

Participation level

All participation levels

Target group

All target groups

Number of participants

Any number of participants

Frequency

## Citizen Panel

Objective: "A Citizens' Panel is a large, demographically representative group of citizens regularly used to assess public preferences and opinions. When conducted online it is sometimes know..."

[More →](#)

## Conversation Café

Objective: "Conversation Cafes aim to foster a society that actively engages in important social topics, which are newly selected for each gathering, by creating a temporary environment that..."

[More →](#)

## Participatory Chinatown (Boston)

Objective: "A mixed online-offline engagement process, the goal of Participatory Chinatown was to engage more Chinatown stakeholders in the 2010 Chinatown Master Planning Process" in Boston (...)

[More →](#)

## Roundtable Discussion

Objective: "Roundtable discussions are small group discussions where everybody has an equal right to participate. This method can in reality encompass a number of different formats; roundtabl..."

[More →](#)

# Why do (not) people/ groups become players?

- Becoming a player:
  - *formulating* an interest/  
goal / vision of the future  
and
  - *entering* an interactive  
arena where decisions are  
at stake
- Importance of culture and life  
experiences
  - Why people (don't) do it?  
(facilitators and barriers to  
engagement)
  - How people prefer to do  
it? (tastes in tactics,  
cultural toolkits)
- Future:
  - imagining and strategizing  
requires resources  
("capacity to aspire,"  
Amartya Sen)

## Implications for practitioners:

- Linking personal  
experiences and life goals  
to collective,  
social processes and  
change  
*[discourse creation]*
- "get to know your  
community" / potential  
players  
*[research-based approach]*
- Empowering people:  
creating a sense of  
belonging and entitlement  
*[community organizing]*

**Thank you!**

Anna Zhelnina, PhD

Helsinki Institute of Urban and Regional Studies

[anna.zhelnina@helsinki.fi](mailto:anna.zhelnina@helsinki.fi)