

Fischer, F. (2009) *Democracy and Expertise: Reorienting Policy Inquiry*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Review by Mark Brennan

The call for an active citizenry characterized by civic engagement and participatory democracy has increasingly been echoed by a wide range of development interests from academia to government and from business to grassroots groups. Active citizens are viewed as a key to local, regional, and national social and economic development. This often ambiguous process of citizen participation and action relies heavily on the role of expertise and advice from economic, political, and academic experts. This expertise can be significant, relevant knowledge and experience or specialized skill from official positions. The presence, absence, or misuse of such expertise can signal success or failure for participatory democracy efforts.

Democracy and Expertise: Reorienting Policy Inquiry explores the central philosophical and practical questions of the roles of policy expertise and democratic society, as well as their interrelationships, and the tensions between them. Although focused largely on political and policy theory, Fischer provides a detailed exploration of the implications of deliberative democratic governance (active democracy in which public deliberation is central to legitimate lawmaking and decision making) for professional expertise. In this setting, deliberative practices (e.g., deliberation, active debate, interaction among citizens and elected officials) are promoted as an essential element in policy-related disciplines that influence participatory governance. The book is unique in that it draws from a wide range of theorists (e.g., Dewey, Collins, Evans), previous research, and application examples (e.g., programs, policies, citizen actions) to aid in understanding the unique role that expertise plays in shaping participatory democracy and an active citizen involvement. Building on the works of Dewey, Fischer focuses on the possibilities for reorienting professional practice to better facilitate citizen understanding of and involvement in complex policy issues. In doing so, Fischer explores how public discourse and deliberation can be viewed as essential constructs in more cooperative forms of policy inquiry. The book is organized in three parts:

1. Policy expertise and citizen participation in the public realm;

2. Situating the technical in the social: implications for policy deliberation; and
3. Policy epistemics for deliberative empowerment: storylines, learning, and passionate reason.

Part 1 provides a solid basis for exploring the interrelationships among expertise, deliberative democratic governance, citizen engagement, and policy. Included is an overview of the debate of technical knowledge versus public responsibility, and an overview of the role of professional expertise in democracy and policy formation. The latter receives the bulk of the attention, with Fischer focusing on the power of experts and expertise in shaping citizen deliberation, participatory governance, and the theoretical base of deliberative democracy. Part 1 is essential for understanding the emergence and evolution of citizen involvement in participatory democracy. It is also an indispensable reading for understanding the process by which expertise shapes public perceptions of citizen involvement in democracy activities.

Part 2 is perhaps the strongest section of the book. It provides a thought-provoking exploration of the links between theory and the mechanisms by which policies, development, civic actions, and democratic processes are shaped. Included is discussion of the social construction of reality, the subjective meanings applied to sustainable development, and the central role of narrative creation in policy and public perceptions. Fischer also provides an analysis that focuses on the relationships among technical and social knowledge, policy inquiry, social learning, and the design of discursive spaces.

Part 3 focuses on the conceptualization of formal models of citizen empowerment. Included are discussions of the emotional connection among the public, cultural politics, empowerment, and transformational learning. Through these discussions, progress toward the application of theory to practice is sought.

Through 10 chapters and a stimulating afterword, Fischer examines the implications of deliberative democratic governance for professional expertise, and extends those implications to specific policy practices. Several chapters in Part 2 are particularly noteworthy in their presentation of a wide range of theories. For example, Chapter 5, "Technical Knowledge in Public Deliberation: Toward a Constructivist Theory of Contributory Expertise," and Chapter 6, "Public Policy as Social Construct: Multiple Meanings

in Sustainable Development,” delve into the social constructionist literature for insights on how the public and experts interact, develop discourse, and move each other toward action.

Chapter 7, “Policy Advice as Storyline: Narrative Knowledge and Expert Practices,” is perhaps the best chapter of the text. Addressing the often overlooked role and function of narratives in social development, the chapter examines literature from a variety of disciplines, including sociology and political science. The result is a thorough exploration of the processes and mechanisms that lead to narrative construction, and the role narrative plays in shaping public response. The chapter’s content effectively links the micro (communities) and macro (the larger society), while providing a basis for citizen action.

Although strong overall, the book could be improved in two areas. First, Part 3 could better synthesize the literature and theory cited throughout the book for a more cohesive call to action and application. Fischer is clear that the goal of the book is to explore and develop a theoretical model for understanding the expertise–participatory democracy interface; however, a more detailed exploration of possible applications would be helpful. The framework presented highlights a number of opportunities for program and policy development that could aid a variety of actions and social change activities. Exploring the opportunities for programs and policy in the context of Fischer’s theoretical model would also be useful. Detailed suggestions for how to shape policy and policy debates would be valuable to grassroots and other citizen-level civic engagement activities.

Second, the book could have been strengthened by giving more attention to the “community” aspect of participatory democracy—the process by which citizens interact with experts to move toward action. Much of what Fischer calls for, especially the concept of citizen participation, is actually community agency (i.e., local capacity to facilitate change). Understanding the role of expertise in shaping citizen action at the grassroots level and the broad societal level is essential. Fischer does not make clear how the role of expertise in the participatory democracy process might differ at the micro and macro levels.

Still, this book is well-suited for professionals, academics, researchers, public policy experts, and others interested in better framing the context in which expertise and citizen engagement interact in participatory democracy. Policy makers, Cooperative Extension faculty members, and grassroots organizations

(e.g., nonprofits, citizen coalitions, activist networks) would find it helpful when developing and implementing citizen engagement activities. It would also work well as a primary or secondary text in university graduate courses that focus on community development, political science, sociology, and policy. In summary, *Democracy and Expertise: Reorienting Policy Inquiry's* attention to theories and logical frameworks for advancing participatory democracy will help readers better understand the role of expertise in shaping program and policy efforts at various governmental and societal levels.

About the Reviewer

Mark Brennan is associate professor of community and leadership development at The Pennsylvania State University. Brennan's teaching, research, writing, and program development concentrates on the role of civic engagement in youth, community, and rural development processes. He earned a B.S. degree from Salisbury University and both his M.S. and Ph.D. degrees from The Pennsylvania State University.