

THE  
OXFORD  
HANDBOOKS  
OF  
POLITICAL  
SCIENCE

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≡ The Oxford Handbook of  
**PUBLIC POLICY**

but uncertainties and ambiguities as well as layers of distrust and fear, anger and division, interests and desires, too. Here we find that planners' interviews echo—and can learn from—the work that public dispute mediators do both in the early stages they call “conflict assessment” and in the actual process of mediating as well.

## 2. INTER-VIEWING IN EVERYDAY POLICY, PLANNING, AND PUBLIC MANAGEMENT PRACTICE

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We can begin with four simple examples to suggest the challenges and possibilities of listening and learning in such planning and change-oriented interviews. We then turn, in the following three sections, to consider: (i) what's at stake as planners listen and inter-view well or poorly; (ii) what makes such work difficult; and finally, (iii) what helps.

Consider first, then, a city planner's short story of his own earlier blindness, his own dawning recognition of what was involved in really listening to the people with whom he'd been working (for a time as a social worker). Jim (as we can call him) says:

First I thought I could at least be polite, that I'd be dealing with the poorest and the most downtrodden of society, that even if I didn't have the power to do much, I could be polite. But then I saw that some people were just so personally obnoxious that it was the most I could do to be business like. Being polite to them was more than I could do. Then, some people just expected the agency to give them hell, and they acted like it.

There was one woman she was just impossible to deal with. She just yelled and screamed and pounded her fists on my desk and nothing I could say did anything. There wasn't anything I could do; I'd try to talk to her, but she'd yell and demand this and that she was just irate.

Then once I couldn't take it anymore. I threw my casebook down on the floor, slammed my fist, and yelled right back at her. What happened? She had a big smile on her face, and in the first calm and steady voice I'd ever heard out of her, she said, “Well, there! You'll be all right yet!”

I was astonished. It seemed I hadn't really been paying attention to her, taking her seriously, really listening to her, until then. (Forester 1989, 112)

Now what's Jim telling us? We notice his early orientation to rules, manners, and politeness—all as a hedge against his own powerlessness, “even if I didn't have the power to do much,” in the face of the overwhelming need of “the poorest and the most downtrodden of society,” as what he could do “at least”—all of which reflects Jim's preoccupation with Jim himself, and perhaps the inadequacy of his position, rather than any specific recognition of particular people and their particular situations. Jim's demeanor begins with manners but retreats to being “business-like” as

he came to work with people “so personally obnoxious that it was the most I could do to be business-like.” Here the conventions of civil deference and regard, being polite, called for more than he could give, and the impersonality of being business-like provided him with a style of work and, it seems, protection.

But then, he tells us, one woman taught him a lesson by provoking him to drop that armor of being business-like, to tell her what he really thought. He slammed his fist, threw the book, yelled back—and what happened? For the first time, perhaps, he became—to the woman in front of him—not just a bureaucratic functionary but a real person: and with “a big smile on her face, and in the first calm and steady voice I’d ever heard out of her, she said, ‘Well, there! You’ll be all right yet!’ ”

What had happened here? Jim believes he had not been seen to be really paying attention before. He wonders if he had been, then, even with the best of intentions, giving others the impression that he was not taking them seriously, not recognizing their own dignity—so he suspects, no wonder they were angry, and not just with the agency but with him! One part of listening to others and learning from others then, he tells us, involves expressing a real regard for the other, taking them seriously, showing a concern that fits the gravity of the situation at hand: No visible respect, no success interviewing!—as we shall see (Slack 2003).

Consider a second example now as a community organizer-turned-city planner warns us of the constant danger of professional blindness in a world of structured inequalities, felt commitments, and economic conflicts. Sue speaks of working in between landowners, shopkeepers, and local residents involved in a local street-widening project, and she tells us:

In the middle, you get all the flak. You’re the release valve. You’re seen as having some power and you do have some . . .

Look, if you have a financial interest in a project, or an emotional one, you want the person in the middle to care about your point of view and if you don’t think they do, you’ll be angry!

[I asked her then, “So when planners try to be ‘professional’ by appearing detached and objective, does it get people angry at them?” and she responded,]

SURE! (Forester 1989, 97)

Notice that Sue begins by locating herself in the structure of the situation: when planners are in the middle, both sides imagine that the planner has some influence, some power, and thus that they on each side are vulnerable and at risk in some ways. She tells us too that social and political-economic structures organize investment and attachment—so landowners will be concerned about the value of their real estate; homeowners and residents who have lived in the area for many years may well have attachments to and affection for their neighborhood in other less commercial, less economic ways (and of course they may well also be concerned about economic value).

But each of these parties will face risk, and each of these parties will demand recognition, Sue tells us: “You want the person [the planner] in the middle to care about your point of view.” Sue does not say, or even seem to feel, that everyone wants

the planner to agree with them, for she implies that the parties recognize complexity, that they do recognize many views and competing concerns (cf. Sanoff 1999). Still, she suggests, the landowners, shopkeepers, and residents alike want the planner at least to “care about [their] point of view,” thus to recognize it, to acknowledge its claims, to understand it (even if it is just one view of many), to consider it seriously, to respect it. Not least of all, she warns us—“and if you don’t think they do [care, thus understand and respect, even if not agree!], you’ll be angry,” an anger that all too many planners and professionals have faced, even despite their best intentions (Susskind and Field 1996).

But then in a wonderfully illuminating moment, too, Sue speaks to the difficulties any of us create if we imagine professional rationality to be detached and uninvolved. Asked, “So when planners try to be ‘professional’ by appearing detached and objective, does it get people angry at them?” she responded quickly and emphatically, “SURE!”

Here we find in a few lines a damning indictment of traditional ideas of professional rationality that make no place for emotional sensitivity and responsiveness, no place for the moral resonance of professional attentiveness—in speech or writing—with the character of situations they face (Benhabib 1990; Slack 2003). But more: we see here too the immediate emotional reaction confronting planners, administrators, managers, organizers... who fail to be sensitive and responsive to citizens’ felt attachments and concerns: these citizens will be angry, and rightfully so (Forester 1999a, ch. 2).

Sue teaches us, as Martha Nussbaum (1990) does, that a rationality that makes no place for such emotional responsiveness is an impoverished rationality, one not only partially blinded to what comes before it but one that’s actually counter-productive, fueling anger and resentment and thus exacerbating rather than working to respond sensitively to civic problems at hand. Such an emotionally flat rationality is a weaker, thinner rationality, not one more robust and capable, but one more blind rather than more perceptive.

Listen now as another planning consultant (“public manager”) tells us about the deceptively simple but politically complex process of learning via interviews in a contentious comprehensive planning process in a busy East Coast transportation corridor. An organizer turned mediator says:

While I love [doing] surveys...I know that for purposes of conflict resolution surveying absolutely is no substitute for personal contact. Interviewing is partially information gathering, but it’s sixty percent relationship building. You are introducing yourself and inviting people to trust you.

It’s a negotiation in itself. And if they trust you, to share information with you, and you treat that information with the respect that you promise, it’s then not a very large leap to say, “Now, will you trust me to put together a meeting where you won’t get beaten up?”

Here we see that interviewing and asking questions reach far beyond information gathering—and we glimpse not just the qualities of sharing information, manifesting respect, earning trust, building relationships, but then all of this in the service of

convening conversations, “a meeting,” in which parties’ fears of aggression, distrust, and disrespect (where they “won’t get beaten up”!) can be overcome in the pursuit of practical learning and actual civic deliberation. Here the work of interviewing no longer remains prior to—but is thoroughly interwoven with—planning and acting and implementation, because as it builds relationships and trust and encourages future collaboration, it enacts a future-oriented planning imagination and directs practical attention as well (Forester 2006; Umemoto 2001).

Finally, listen to a European port city’s planning director and public administrator who contrasts two very different styles of interviewing. Rolf Jensen suggests that he tried to wean his own staff from a conventional, “old fashioned way” to a more exploratory, diagnostic, even deliberative style of planning and policy analysis. He begins by illustrating his staff’s earlier practice:

For instance, when [our planners] did urban renewal, and they talked about public participation, it was in the more old fashioned way. You go out with a sketch and say look, “This is what I think is good for you,” and some [people] will not be able to understand the sketch at all, and they’d think, “Well, what should I comment on? What should we do? I won’t say anything.”

And some will say, “This portion is really good; but this portion we don’t think is good at all.” And the planners would say, “Why do you think so?” And the people would say, maybe, “We’re lacking trees,” or “There’s not enough place for the kids.” And the planner would go back, and he would say, “Well, I think they still could use the space for the kids over there,” or the planner might change the plan and then go back again.

But it’s not really a negotiated process at all. You listen to something, and you decide what you will hear and not hear, and what you will do and not do. When you’ve done that a couple of times, then you say, “Well, I’ve done participation. Now, here’s a plan as a result of that process.” And I don’t think I’m exaggerating. That was about the way it was done. *So I wanted to do it differently.*

This planning director continues to describe another way that planners could work with others, encourage “participation,” and learn in the process:

[There] was a [land use] issue that was hard to solve. So we created a special group, trying to come up with schemes for this area, and then the planner would be just a mediator in that group. The planner would let the parties argue, and try to find solutions; they would work with colored pens and papers; they could write; they could do whatever they liked. They had what you might call workshops together, in which the basic task of the planner was to get the parties to understand each other because in [this country’s] tradition, many times, you just present the maps, and that’s it: “Take my demand or not!” [It’s] a sort of power play.

We tried to conceive from the first day that we are here to listen. We are here to try to understand. But we are also here to try to tell you a story in other words why we are concerned about certain things . . . if you do that, you gain two things.

First of all, the other party recognizes you too as a party . . .

But also, secondly, you might be able to help that party to come up with other demands.

This happened both when we as planners met with individual groups and met altogether all the time! That attitude we used over and over and over again: never presenting a sketch as the sketch. Always saying, “Look, the sketch is not important, but what I’ve been trying to find a solution to, through this sketch, is this and that and that and that and that and that.” In other

words, it was the intentions and the characteristics with the sketch that was important, not the sketch itself.

It was important as a way of asking questions, and as a way of controlling questions to the parties: “Does that serve your needs?” “Is this something that you can live with?” Or, “What is really burning you if you look at this sketch?” (Forester 1994, 1999)

Here we find a full-fledged sense that planners’ ways of asking questions embodies their overall planning strategies: collecting information and then making their own decisions or, instead, involving affected people more directly and intimately in framing options and choices in varied processes of discussion and dialogue. This planner’s account of learning through “the sketch” acknowledges that sketches are also ways to control questions, to focus attention selectively, but we can see the sketch too as a door to newly imagined options and possibilities. In the contrast between the old-fashioned way and the more deliberative strategy, we see the significance of the planners’ learning with others, the significance of planners both informing and learning from the views and cares of stakeholders.

In applied settings, in the face of complex projects and policy and project disputes, planners’ interviews, we will see, need to reach far beyond traditional survey research interviews, and far even beyond ethnographic interviews, in part because planners must try not only to explain, not only to understand, but also to imagine, clarify, and refine—actually design!—future action. So they must try both to probe and to organize possibilities and thus too, profoundly, in revealing those possibilities, they work to organize hope. We will see this more clearly as we explore now just how much is at stake in planners’ practical interviews.

### 3. WHAT ARE THE STAKES: HOW MUCH MORE THAN “THE FACTS?”

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So let’s consider how much we can learn from these interviews—or miss! In practice, it turns out, we can not just learn reflectively—as we reframe our assumptions and expectations—but we can learn deliberatively with others as well: we can reformulate our strategies (how we might act), our relationships (who “we” are), and our interests (what we really care about) too. If we appreciate these many ways that we can learn, we will see much more clearly too what planners and policy analysts might miss in their meetings, what they might not “get,” what they actually might never know that they’ve missed!

We can explore “what’s at stake” in good interviewing, what’s to be learned or missed, first by asking what’s to be learned about the other person, the interviewee; second, by asking what can be learned about the possible relationships between interviewers and interviewees, and perhaps others; and third, by asking what can be learned about the interviewer’s own actions. Consider each briefly in turn.

### 3.1 Learning about the Other

#### *Information*

We often interview people to get basic information about what they do, their behavior. “How often do you use the park?” we might ask, or “When you take your children to the doctor, do you use the bus, take a car, get a ride from a friend?” And so forth. We look for the facts of the matter, even if we know that the facts never speak for themselves. And sometimes, of course, we wonder not just about others’ behavior but about their preferences—and these concerns are among the classic concerns of survey research (e.g. Judd, Smith, and Kidder 1991).

#### *Preferences*

Beyond some “baseline” facts, then, we may look for subjective desires of the people we interview: “How do you feel about that undeveloped land nearby? Would you welcome a housing project built there? Do you want a park for local children to play in? Given a choice between leaving the land as-is or building A, B, or C, what do you prefer?” And so on, as discussed in standard discussions of survey research (Judd, Smith, and Kidder 1991, 230–3).

#### *Values*

But preferences are just one form of subjective orientations that we might wish to explore. What about “values?” We say typically that we “hold” preferences, but we “cherish” values. We take values to make up part of who we are, what we stand for, what makes us distinctive—in ways that mere preferences do not. When we cannot have one preference, we typically try to substitute another satisfaction in its place. But when we cannot honor a value or lose the valued object, we don’t simply look for other satisfactions but we grieve, we feel a deep loss for the intrinsic good that we’ve lost (Nussbaum 1986). Asking about values, probing for what can be deeply meaningful in a person’s life, accordingly, involves an intimacy and requires a degree of respect that asking about preferences typically does not—and so treating another’s cherished values as merely strategic preferences can get interviewers in a good deal of trouble (Forester 1999b).

#### *Identity*

We might wish to know not only what community members value deeply, but how they imagine themselves, how they understand themselves as members of a community of place or faith or commitment. Here we explore not only elements of commitment, but the ways that history, tradition, and long practice have shaped (even tacit) senses of “who we are” or “who I am”—so that in turn we may regard certain Others as “foreign” or “strange,” or to be feared or presumed as not interested

in certain issues, or presumed not to be open to dialogue, discussion, or cooperative relationships.

So in interviews that assess the social structuring of controversies or disputes, we need to examine how citizens' identities might shape strong presumptions of yet other citizens. Jones calls herself "an outsider" and speaks of Smith as "an insider," for example, and this sense of political identity might help to explain both their never having spoken face to face, despite their deep concerns with neighborhood issues, and the yet unexplored possibilities of their meeting and perhaps even collaborating.

### *Local Knowledge*

We certainly might want to know not just what a community member desires, prefers, wants, or values, but what special knowledge they bring to the situations at hand. That "local knowledge" forms the expertise about their own lives that they have in the case at hand, the expertise they bring as perceptive people having lived and worked where they have, having had the problems and meaningful experiences that they uniquely and particularly have had.

We should explore this knowledge not as an either-or alternative to the specialized, professional knowledge that others might bring to bear, but as an additional source of insight, suggestion, suspicion, or consideration, as an additional source of relevant enquiry and research. To miss this local knowledge would assure our blindness to the particular cases in front of us. Listening only to the special knowledge of professionals, we might find ourselves generally correct but particularly, in this specific case, irrelevant (Corburn 2005).

## 3.2 Learning about Possible Relationships

### *Needs for Recognition*

How we do an interview can profoundly shape, and be just as important as, what we learn from it. If our approach to interviewing makes community members feel used, manipulated, taken advantage of, disrespected, or not really heard, our interviews will do far more harm than good. Part of what's at stake in many interviews, then, is the opportunity for the interviewee to be heard: to be listened to, to gain the recognition of the interviewer as having value and dignity, having a "voice" deserving to be heard (Stein and Mankowski 2004), having an experience that will be taken seriously (whether or not others subsequently agree or disagree)—and, not least of all, having a clear sense from the interviewer how his or her comments might inform future planning or decision making.

So the interviewer who cares more about organizing the clipboard and interview questions than respecting the interviewee may well do damage and learn little in

the interview conversation too. In contrast, the interviewer who asks questions with respect and pays attention to the tone and pace and experience of the interviewee gives something back as well as takes information and insight from the interview conversation. As interviewers enact respect or disrespect in asking questions, they satisfy or frustrate interviewees' needs for recognition, and the success of their interview can easily hang in the balance (Arnstein 1969).

### *Distrust*

Along with that dignity, respect, and recognition at stake in every interview come matters of trust and the dangers of distrust. Depending upon the way an interviewer acknowledges what's been said as worthy of attention, as deserving of respect, as tied to the person speaking and their vulnerability and safety, the interviewer can earn the trust or distrust of those with whom they speak. The interviewer who shows up unannounced, a stranger, with few connections to the community—who appears ready to vanish just as quickly and never to be in touch again—will hardly inspire trust and confidence that they'll either understand really what they've been told or act in accord with its insight. A South African public official put this nicely once when he said, "Show up [for the first time] in my community to do interviews with a tape recorder and you could get hurt!"

### *Value, not only "Values"*

In many interviews, especially when the subject matter can be complex or controversial, the words spoken are just doorways to deeper worlds of issues and concerns. Interviewers in applied settings are often looking not just for answers to questions, not just for bits of information, but also for clues to what really matters, to what needs to be worried about, what needs to be attended to, what needs to be honored or protected or explored further—so that some actual action can follow. Good listeners know that what's significant to a speaker will often be implicit, so interviewers need to listen as much or more for revealing metaphors as for any clear declarations of values.

Here the interviewer needs to reach well beyond the literal words and well beyond the simple facts at hand to ask about "the facts that matter," to probe as they wonder, "what's being disclosed here as really significant?" Here interviewers try to learn about underlying value, what matters, as well as about the more superficial, if also important, rhetorically espoused "values," preferences, or commitments.

### *Co-invention*

Interviews provide opportunities, too, not just for information gathering but for cooperation, collaboration, even co-invention. An interviewer's question can prompt

fresh thoughts—responses that suggest, “I’ve never thought of it that way before.” An interviewer might ask about a possible line of action, about options, “Would there be any other way to approach this, any other way to explore getting time off?” and find that the question prompts a new thought, “Well, maybe if I offered to help beforehand . . .”

Here the interview becomes not just an exchange, a *quid pro quo*, not just a back and forth conversation, but actually a process of collaboration and co-creation. By exploring possible moves, efforts, suggestions, enquiries, or questions that might be asked of still others, both sides can enquire together to explore new options or new ways of understanding issues at hand.

### 3.3 Learning about the Interviewer’s Own Influence

#### *Emotional Responsiveness*

If interviewers display no emotion at all as they listen and pose questions, they can be seen as callous, arrogant, egotistical, disinterested, and disrespectful, or worse. So in our opening quotations above, for example, we see that only when professionals show that they take seriously the experience of those with whom they’re speaking will they be likely to have productive conversations—and actually showing that may only be possible through their own emotional responsiveness that they as interviewers bring to bear, that they themselves express.

Being responsive need not mean being wholly deferential, being cowed or intimidated or hopelessly distracted, but it might well mean being led to new questions, being led to even more important areas of conversation than the interviewer imagined initially. In part the promise of every interview lies in such discovery, in surprise, in the interviewee at times showing the questioner altogether new issues, new domains to explore, new matters of significance and relevance that ought to be “looked into.” Such responsiveness, Sarah Dooling suggests, requires a quality of presence that works “from a place of curiosity and hope,” as well as from “a place of political savvy and strategic caution” (personal communication, May 2004).

So emotional responsiveness on the interviewer’s part offers opportunities as well as dangers, opportunities for discovery as well as dangers of getting lost. Such responsiveness challenges interviewers to show that when they ask questions, they hope not just to fill out boxes on a clipboard but to show that they “can relate” to the experience, or at least to this telling of the experience, of the interviewee.

#### *Relationship Building*

Interviewers who can’t inspire a minimum of trust may not just lose their interviews, for worse still can happen. Instead of being asked to leave, interviewees might ask

them to stay and give them a taste of the game they seem to be playing. So a distrusted interviewer might evoke stories and tales designed for many purposes—many purposes that the interviewer may never discover.

Distrusted interviewers may be told “just what they want to hear,” whether or not it has any relationship to any real world. They may evoke feigned cooperation just because the interviewee is more worried about his or her own safety than with helping the interloping interviewer: the interviewee might wonder, “Who will find out, and how might I suffer, if I say really what I feel here?”

Similarly, when interviewers can inspire trust and ensure the safety of those they’re talking to, they can build relationships that they might build upon in the future. Not least of all, the interviewer might be able to come back, to keep in touch, to learn in the future. So the organizer turned mediator and public manager above told us, “If they trust you, to share information with you, and you treat that information with the respect that you promise, it’s then not a very large leap to say, ‘Now, will you trust me to put together a meeting where you won’t get beaten up?’ ”

Curiously, a sense of humor can help both to level and to build collaborative working relationships across the interviewer–interviewee divide. Humor can play an ironic role, not just because everyone might laugh, but because they might laugh together: because humor creates a temporary common ground from which new relationships can arise—new relationships of those who come to see something surprising together, and to see in doing so that they share the possibility of viewing the world together, recognizing similar experiences in the world, finding some experiences similarly strange, or surprising, or wacky, or contradictory, or ambiguous, and evoking similarly “a laugh” (Forester 2004a).

### *Discovery and Humility*

Finally, interviewees often promise to break the presumptions and ordinary expectations of their interviewers. People just say the strangest and most wonderful things. Or they do it in the most unexpected ways. Robert Coles writes of interviewing African-American families with children who’d been the object of the most vicious, hateful heckling as they went daily to school, and Coles tells us of the astounding graciousness and generosity with which he, a stranger and an outsider, a white professional psychiatrist, was received and welcomed.

Humility is a virtue in interviewing not only as a corrective to the dangers of the arrogance that those of us with our important questions can have, the arrogance of those of us who “need to know,” as we’re on some “official mission” to “find out,” but humility counts too because as interviewers we are so ridiculously finite, so merely mortal, so imperfect, so far really from any full rationality or omniscience, that we need to be as open to surprise and discovery as anyone else in the world (Woodruff 2001). Or more: Humility can help us because we may too often already have our sights set, our blinders in place, our presumptions operating even when we think we know to hold our “biases” aside.

So the wonder of words, and the wonder of each new meeting, lies in part in the discoveries we can share in inter-views, if we listen for far more than words, for far more than intentions too (Coles 1989; Reich 1994).

## 4. BUT WHAT OBSTACLES MAKE INTERVIEWING TOUGH?

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Talking about interviews is easy, but conducting them can be much tougher. Who are you, after all, to interview someone else? What will they think, once you start to ask questions? How badly have they felt treated by other interviewers—and how will that predispose them to treat you? What are you doing for them? Will they have any reason to trust you? Let's review several of the obstacles that you might face.

### 4.1 How Do You Look Before You Ever Open Your Mouth?

Consider all the non-verbal signals you send when you approach another person to “do” an interview. How do you dress (casually, formally, officially)? How do you smell (full of aftershave or perfume)? How do you arrive (by bus, by foot, by car, whose car)?

The South African official who warned us about the dangers of bringing a tape recorder to interviews unannounced was not alone. Speaking of her experiences as a young planner in Jerusalem, Sarah Kaminker recalled walking in neighborhoods with official-looking maps and having people stream out of their houses, once with rocks. Another planner spoke of introducing herself in a community meeting, and she recalled how she was then greeted as the representative of the city's powerful planning agency: “A guy got up in the back of the room and started yelling at me that his family had lost their home because of what we had done—but I hadn't even been born when that had happened!”

In such cases, these planners teach us, interviewers often send signals before they ever open their mouths. The way they dress, drive, equip, and identify themselves shapes the expectations of others, expectations for which the interviewers have some responsibility too.

### 4.2 “Mere Words” Matter

If interviewers use language that interviewees find strange, overly formal, obscurely technical, ambiguous, or arrogant, their interviews will fail. The language of our