

# Who Cares? Arnstein's Ladder, the Emotional Paradox of Public Engagement, and (Re)imagining Planning as Caring

Emotions motivate public servants—we want to see community members flourish rather than suffer. But our education, training, and professional norms lead us to control or avoid emotions in the course of work. We call this dynamic the emotional paradox of public engagement. Our research illustrates perils resulting from the paradox as well as paths forward to re-imagine public engagement as caring.

## Arnstein's Ladder and the Emotional Paradox of Public Engagement

Arnstein's hugely influential 1969 article, "A Ladder of Citizen Participation," uses vivid language to set a scene of a heated, upset public engaging with planners. This emotional public response, argues Arnstein, comes from the lack of power that community members hold in public planning processes. But through the rest of the article, as she describes the rungs of the ladder of citizen participation, Arnstein leaves emotions behind. That Arnstein stops discussing emotion after her powerful use of emotional language in the introduction reflects a typical response to threatening emotion—to withdraw to reason, order, and impersonal process.

Arnstein reveals the emotional paradox of public engagement, which cuts in two directions:

← Planners seek self-protection by creating emotional distance from their work.

Planners' ability to acknowledge the full range of feelings that make them human and give meaning to their work can create opportunities for them to build mutual understanding, enhance trust and foster partnerships.→

## Complex and Changing Brains

Understanding how the interplay of thought and emotion shape humans' inner and outer lives is critical for skillful planning. So, we turn to key insights about brains from recent work in neuroscience and psychology. Like all people:

- Emotional threats provoke planners to flee, fight, or freeze.
- Planners' brains use cognitive shortcuts without 'rational' thinking to make decisions.
- Planners' brains are moldable, rewired based on experiences and patterns that we can intentionally or inadvertently reinforce, including reactions to emotional threats.
- Planners work in an intellectual tradition and society that stigmatize and discredit emotion. This tradition is mired in stereotypes that reinforce systems of privilege and oppression.
- Planners have limited perceptions of others' emotions and cannot assume that they can accurately interpret others' emotions.

### *For more information and resources:*

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## Examining the Emotional Paradox of Public Engagement in Planning Practice

A planner interested in using these insights to overcome the emotional paradox will have trouble finding practical guidance from typical sources in planning practice or education. Very few reports, guides, and training materials we reviewed from the American Planning Association or the American Institute of Certified Planners addressed emotion. While AICP's Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct calls for planners to "serve the public interest with compassion for the welfare of all people," there is little or no guidance on how to do that, or on dealing with emotions that arise from planning. And while emotion is emerging as a valid topic for planning scholars to consider, this work barely informs resources aimed at practitioners.

## Brains in Action in the Public Sphere

In this context, we present other insights on brains:

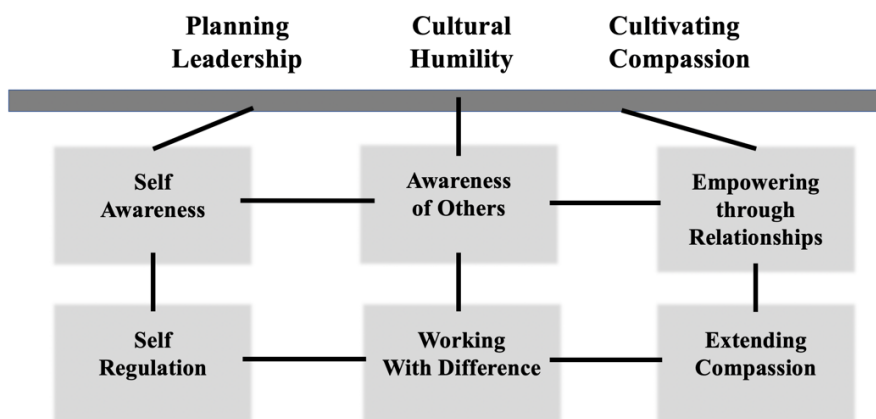
- Using **emotional intelligence** (EI), planners can embrace, understand, and use the wisdom of their emotions.
- With **social intelligence** (SI), planners who understand relationships as inherently emotional can be more intelligent and efficient in their work.
- Through **cultural intelligence** (CQ), planners can work with emotions to engage the full spectrum of diversity in communities, particularly as planners aim to advance social equity and justice.
- **Power is relational.** Planners may feel empowered when fostering public engagement, even as that power generates cautionary feelings of unease. Fostering EI, SI, and CQ can help planners weave stakeholder networks that generate power.

## Reimagining Planning as Caring: Leadership, Cultural Humility, and Cultivating Compassion

Based on these insights, we present a conceptual model re-imagining planning as caring. This will require planners to transform their vision of leadership, humbly engage with difference, and cultivate compassion. Planning as caring is a long-term orientation, requiring a commitment that spans months and years, while also requiring daily efforts.

We propose six building blocks for this model: And we present questions for self-reflection, such as:

### Re-imagining Planning as Caring



*Am I attuned to my own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, including those I would prefer not to experience?*

*Do I have reliable practices or tools to manage my emotions, like deep breathing exercises, mindfulness meditation, or creative expression?*

*Do I strive to listen to the deeper meaning and emotions words often convey?*

*Do I use my awareness of others to help them be in a position to prosper and succeed?*

## Key Takeaways for Practitioners

1. Engage in self-reflection using the questions above.
2. Find professional and personal entry points, such as facilitation training, storytelling, or meditation, to build skills in one or more of the six building blocks.
3. Deepen your ability in any one building block to foster growth in others through a process that is inherently non-linear and is particular to your own experience and needs.

How planners navigate this moment, and whether we connect our emotions to our thoughts and practices, will shape the field for years to come, just as Arnstein's ladder shapes our thinking today.

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