The Relevance of Contemplative Studies and Practices for Improving Participatory Urban Governance

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ABSTRACT

Evidence suggests that substantial and robust community engagement is essential to local urban governance. In this paper, we reflect on the importance of a more comprehensive approach to community engagement that values both the cognitive and the affective, the technical and the relational, and the outer and inner dimensions of human experiences. The intangible and inner dimensions receive little attention in public administration and political science fields, or in governance processes themselves. The paper aims to make a start in addressing this gap by engaging ideas from the emerging field of contemplative studies. This field brings attention to the inner worlds of people, and the importance of valuing affective and embodied experiences. We explore how community engagement processes could potentially embody these insights to strengthen participatory urban governance, and reflect on some of the risks and limitations.

Introduction

The promise of contemplative science lies herein: human beings have the capacity to transform their relationship with the world, and, in this way, change the world. However, we are still lacking an intellectual framework for this new view. How can we understand it in an academic discourse that typically separates the natural and social sciences, the individual from the collective and the inner from the outer?

Sander Tideman, The Need for Contemplative Social Science

Current forms of community engagement in the service delivery processes of South African local government do not adequately consider relational and affective dimensions of engagement. This gap undermines communication and trust between communities and municipalities, both of which contribute to breakdowns in local governance (Storey 2014). In this paper, we explore the potential of transforming local urban governance by integrating relevant contemplative practices into formal participatory processes associated with service delivery in local communities.

In South Africa, the demand for adequate housing and basic public services is expected to grow, especially as informal settlements keep expanding (Turok and Parnell 2009). The challenges to engage meaningfully with residents living in these contexts requires improving governance approaches and practices in fundamental and practical ways. Fresh thinking and bold explorations are needed. In this paper, we understand service
delivery (and the governance of services) as a relational process of complex interactions, actors, information, feelings and power dynamics (Bartels and Turnbull 2020). Yet, often left out of the study of such interactions are the intangible and inner dimensions. In fact, although the social worlds of stakeholders are already considered through sociological approaches, the inner worlds/experiences of individuals and their subjective experiences remain excluded in public administration and local governance thinking and practice. This seems essential since as researchers have noted, subjectivities are an integral part of how people understand their relationship to others and are central to the operation of local governments (Wamsler and Raggers 2018). The social and material impact of this gap in local realities requires careful consideration. This paper argues for a more comprehensive understanding and approach that values both the cognitive and affective, the technical and the relational, and the outer and inner aspects of human experiences.

The emerging field of Contemplative Studies (Kabat-Zinn 2003; Komjathy 2017; Purser, Forbes, and Burke 2016) offers an exciting interdisciplinary approach with the potential to complement and extend knowledge around ‘governance’ produced by disciplines such as public administration and political science. Though there is not one agreed upon definition, a contemplative approach is commonly understood to embrace experiential, first-person practices that cultivate attention to ‘the present moment’ (Kabat-Zinn 2003). It challenges the prioritisation of discursive and logical thinking (Dahl, Lutz, and Davidson 2015) by attending to and surfacing embodied affective and relational dimensions of experience. Importantly, it offers practices to help address the exclusion of the inner dimensions of ‘being’ by bringing affective and relational awareness and reflection as key elements of social processes.

We explore, through a conceptual synthesis, the potential benefits of, and ways to incorporate a contemplative approach in community engagement processes. Our central question is: How can the field of contemplative studies, both its theoretical approaches and practices, contribute to addressing some of the relational and affective dimensions of participatory urban governance? Through a critical discussion of key debates and trajectories within the field of contemplative studies, we locate the paper among scholars (Purser, Forbes, and Burke 2016; Stanley 2012; Magee 2016) who emphasise the potential of such an approach for cultivating other-regarding ethical orientations, collective solidarity and efforts towards social change. This subset of literature in the field, we believe, offers practical insights for participatory governance processes to facilitate better communication, reflection and collaborative relations.

In the next section, we review the current state of community engagement in South African local government, highlighting relational challenges and gaps in standard forms and models of engagement. While the institutional, material and structural dimensions of governance and public administration remain important for community engagement, our paper zooms into the relational dimension, especially its emotional aspects, which is slowly receiving greater scholarly attention (Bartels and Turnbull 2020; Da Silva Machado 2020). Disciplines such as political psychology, philosophy and ethics are increasingly noting how lack of emotional engagement impairs governance and justice outcomes, highlighting the importance of emotions and compassion in decision-making and justice (see for instance, Nussbaum 2013). We therefore move away from ‘relationistic’ approaches which look at transactional exchanges between
actors and systems, embracing rather ‘relational approaches’, which are grounded in a processual conception of social reality as itself relationally constructed (Bartels and Turnbull 2020).

We then interrogate the field of contemplative studies as a lens for better formulating the inner worlds and experiences of individuals as a component of this relationality and for introducing reflective approaches into these processes. Currently, there is still limited empirical research of contemplative practice in social contexts (Islam, Holm, and Karjalainen 2017), and even less so in government-community engagement. As a field, contemplative studies is still under development (Komjathy 2017). Bringing these two fields of study and practice together, we apply a conceptual framework of contemplative practices to explore how contemplative practices could be incorporated into engagement processes and methods. While we show that nurturing awareness and empathy of citizens and public officials would be overall positive, we highlight the need of challenging and transforming the systemic and institutional arrangements at the organisational level for any meaningful changes to happen. Finally, we discuss the potential impact but also risks and limitations such practices could have for participatory urban governance. We conclude with suggestions for future research to deepen the conversation between the fields of contemplative studies and governance studies.

**Participatory urban governance: the affective dimensions**

Participation has characterised international development policy and governance approaches since the 1980s, including in post-apartheid South Africa (Storey 2014). Alternatively termed community engagement and participatory governance, participation generally refers to the inclusion of citizens in policy and service delivery processes (Fung and Wright 2001; Gaventa 2002). In principle, it means policy and development decisions responding to citizen needs and priorities (Cohen and Fung 2004). In practice, participatory governance covers a multitude of methods and structures intended to gather citizen inputs, report back on government decisions, and at times actively engage citizens in deliberative planning and coproduction (Mitlin 2008).

Scholars attribute both intrinsic and extrinsic benefits to participatory governance (Van Damme and Brans 2012). It is expected to improve the efficiency and sustainability of services, as well as deepen democracy by improving the quality of deliberations and the relationships between government and citizenry (Speer 2012). In fact, many of the gains expected from participation are relational. Participation scholars argue, for instance, that the involvement of local lay knowledge enables social learning and helps to reveal win-win potential (Yearley et al. 2003; Newig and Fritsch 2008). This can yield better informed and overall more sustainable decisions. Public officials, who often lead and manage local participation processes, must facilitate information sharing, help translate ideas to enable new perspectives, and stimulate empathy and a sense of connection among participants (Feldman and Khademian 2007). These are relational rather than technical tasks, requiring the ability to listen deeply, be self-aware and manage conflict (Kearns 2012). Research also shows that when citizens experience participation as fair and concerned with equity, respect and honesty, their trust in government increases (Van Ryzin 2011).
The significance of relations and affect for participatory governance is evident in emerging notions of ‘relational’ and ‘affective governance’ (Jupp, Pykett, and Smith 2017), and ‘relational public administration’ (Bartels and Turnbull 2020). Relational approaches have also become central in studies of network governance, partnerships, co-production, contracting, social welfare and citizen participation, amongst others (Bartels and Turnbull 2020). According to Brigg (2018), prioritising relations over entities enables a more nuanced and dynamic understanding of governance. Viewed as a relational process means that:

Governance is not a product of interaction between static individuals and structures existing side by side, but a process of ‘dynamic becoming’ in which all parts ‘co-create’ the ‘situation’ through their relationships and are reflexively shaped by this (Bartels and Turnbull 2020, 1328).

This dynamic relational approach suggests both everyday and structured interactions between government and communities are important ‘sites’ where relationships unfold and experiences and interactions between various actors influence how services are delivered (Pressman and Wildavsky in Bartels and Turnbull 2020). Emotions are also integral in this ‘dynamic becoming’. Psychosocial and feminist theories exploring affect in governance (Durnová 2013; Hunter 2015) underscore how emotions are not properties of the individual in response to an external context. Rather, emotions materialise and become meaningful in the ongoing interaction and relating of people, context, objects, ideas, etc. (Dobson 2015). Giving stage to affectionality, not only rationality, therefore opens conceptual and practical pathways to improve relations, trust and collaboration, as well as material conditions in service delivery processes. For various authors (see e.g. Bartels 2018), there is value in pursuing pragmatic interventions in governance processes that are attentive to such relational dynamics exploring the inner dimensions of experience that inform and shape interpersonal interactions. In other words, the processes occurring ‘within each individual’s head’ either within or before any engagement (Goodin 2003, 11; as quoted in Leggett 2021, 8).

**Participatory governance challenges in South Africa**

Studies of participation point to a general failure by municipalities to engage communities in meaningful and substantive ways (Lemanski 2017; Miraftab and Wills 2005; Sinwell 2011), and survey data indicates especially low levels of trust in municipalities (Afrobarometer 2016). Research finds government-led engagements are often designed and implemented in a technocratic manner, producing formulaic attempts to ‘tick the box’ (Oldfield 2008; Smith 2011; Vivier, De Jongh, and Thompson 2020) and garner community buy-in (Winkler 2011). Considerable literature details various macro-political and institutional constraints that shape formal spaces of engagement (see for instance, Cooke and Kothari 2001; Hickey and Mohan 2004; Rahnema 2010) and how participation is often used to rubberstamp certain agendas, thereby delegitimising alternative development priorities and service delivery models (Storey 2014; Cornwall 2008).

In informal settlements, where the demand for basic public services as previously discussed is expected to grow, participation is constrained by major power imbalances: between communities and government, within communities themselves as well as
within government institutions, especially in the political-administrative interface (Vivier, De Jongh, and Thompson 2020; Masuku and Jili 2019). These affect engagement dynamics, the capacity to collaborate, or even communicate. Power also manifests in differences in gender, age, level of education, class, and the ability to speak in the same language (Van der Riet and Boettiger 2009). Different actors also bring different objectives and agendas. Officials might perceive these as part of the technical and procedural process of service delivery. Residents might engage for the purpose of enacting broader material change, demanding government accountability, or to secure employment opportunities made available through infrastructure projects (Vivier, De Jongh, and Thompson 2020).

Increasingly widespread and regular protests (Alexander 2010), especially in crowded urban informal centres, bring attention to the structural violence of absent or faulty service delivery (Morudu and Halsall 2017). Such protests have been attributed to the lack of dignified housing and services, as well as poor governance, failed engagement and community perceptions of uncaring and self-serving municipal leaders (Chigwata, O’Donovan, and Powell 2017). Overall, in informal settlement contexts, where service delivery improvements are most needed, community engagement is a complex process. It is grounded in existing structural inequalities and political power relations and further driven by harsh material realities and emotional sensitivities around public infrastructure.

However, while significant political and structural conditions certainly plague local governance (including community engagement) processes, this does not preclude the relevance of relational and affective dimensions as mentioned before. von Schnitzler (2013)’s work for instance on struggles over the enforcement and evasion of service payments underscores how infrastructure has become a site of political struggle between residents, engineers and utility officials, grounded in both material and affective aspects rarely explored by political theory. Her study (von Schnitzler 2008) on the use of prepayment technologies in townships also shows how such a technically focused ‘solution’ often fails. Conversely, researchers in a ‘community scorecard’ engagement project in Cape Town similarly observe how valuing ‘softer’ aspects such as emotions (frustration and apathy) throughout the process was paramount to building relationships between officials and residents and addressing specific infrastructure issues (Sanchez-Betancourt and Vivier 2019). And yet, the relational and affective dimensions of engagement and governance have not received much attention.

It may be argued that giving attention to the inner experiences of participants, or to working at the interpersonal level to build relationships of trust risks ignoring structural challenges and material gaps. The question is, therefore, how to translate or leverage affectional aspects such as giving space to emotions through more reflective processes into further material change, such as improving actual service delivery? This brings us back to the debate in the participatory governance literature regarding intrinsic and extrinsic benefits, or whether the emphasis should be on process or outcomes (Speer 2012; Van Damme and Brans 2012). Here, it remains debated whether building relationships should be the outcome or process of public services as a breakaway from a transactional paradigm (Bartels and Turnbull 2020).

Delving into this question is unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper. We do not suggest that attending to relations and affect will simply overcome these kinds of
challenges. We simply aim to bring into view the inner and social worlds and experiences of individuals, and to begin a conversation about their relevance and importance in public administration and local governance thinking and practice. Overall, although interest in the relational dimensions of public administration is widespread and continues to grow, the contours of this agenda have not yet been explicitly formulated (Bartels and Turnbull 2020). It is in this vein that we ask whether contemplative approaches can help develop these contours by focusing on the inner dimensions of being humans, officials and citizens.

**Contemplative studies: forging new ways of relating**

Contemplative studies is an emerging, interdisciplinary and experimental field dedicated to understanding and developing practices that cultivate attention to the present moment and the on-going flow of thoughts and emotions (Leggett 2021). There is not one agreed upon definition or approach, though it is often subsumed under notions of mindfulness, meditation, and the study of mindfulness-based interventions or MBIs (Howarth et al. 2019; Cullen 2011). It is commonly understood to embrace experiential, first-person approaches, which include a wide range of mind–body practices to develop the mind beyond discursive and logical thinking (Dahl, Lutz, and Davidson 2015) towards ‘non-judgmental, present-moment awareness’ (Britton et al. 2013; Kabat-Zinn 2003). For the purposes of this paper, we use the terms ‘contemplative’ and ‘mindful’ interchangeably.

Emerging out of Buddhist traditions, mindfulness has become a popular theme and practice in various clinical settings and organisational contexts – from schools and corporate workplaces, leadership training programmes and criminal rehabilitation, to public health, social movements and even among UK parliamentarians (Chari 2016; Ferguson 2016). As a field of study, it has gained most traction in the domains of positive psychology and neuroscience (Komjathy 2017). It has also been popular among management and organisation scholars studying ‘organisational mindfulness’ (Vogus and Sutcliffe 2012). An emerging critical literature (see for example Purser, Forbes, and Burke 2016) laments the lack of intellectual diversity. Stanley (2012), for example, challenges the tendency of dominant psychological approaches to reduce mindfulness to a set of operational definitions and measurement through experimental models. Some scholars (Leggett 2021; Stanley 2012; Islam, Holm, and Karjalainen 2017; Purser, Forbes, and Burke 2016) call for wider critical appraisal of mindfulness from different scholarly fields, particularly the social sciences and humanities, looking also at its political and sociological character. As Leggett (2021, 4) aptly summarises:

> Mindfulness crystallizes the dilemma of whether we read individualized practices as integral to transformative social and political action, or as the model for neoliberal self-governance […] My argument is that both tendencies hold, such that Mindfulness constitutes a key site of contestation with expansive political potential.

In what follows, we review three key criticisms raised against what we will refer to as the mainstream framing of mindfulness, and reflect on the implications of this framing for participatory urban governance. Thereafter we turn to alternative framings that take seriously this social and political potential.
Critiques of the mainstream framing of mindfulness

Critiques of mindfulness are plenty and have been well-articulated elsewhere already (see for example, Leggett 2021; Purser, Forbes, and Burke 2016). We do not intend to regurgitate all of these here but focus on three points we believe are of particular importance.

Firstly, scholars argue that mainstream mindfulness encourages a disembodied form of ‘pure awareness’, exemplified in the focus on ‘being in the moment’ and attending to the ‘moment to moment’ flow of experience (Chari 2016; Leggett 2021). According to Leggett (2021), this need not exclude an understanding of the social, temporal and material circumstances that shape one’s thoughts, observations and affective responses. Yet, mainstream perspectives neglect relational interconnection of the individual and social, or inner and outer dimensions of human beings. In doing so, experiences of pain, discomfort, anxiety, stress and suffering can be attributed to the individual’s inability to be mindful and pay attention (Purser, Forbes, and Burke 2016). The tendency to frame mindfulness in this way is evident in Gelles (2015, 85; cited in Walsh 2016, 157) claims in Mindful Work that: ‘Stress isn’t something imposed on us. It’s something we impose on ourselves’. Mindfulness programmes thus target individual emotional regulation, self-improvement and psychological well-being (Stanley 2012; Nehring and Frawley 2020; Walsh 2016) often ignoring structural constraints. The second key critique is thus that the focus on the inner state of mind allows for the individualisation of responsibility for that experience.

Finally, critical mindfulness scholars argue that mindfulness is being exploited in service of neoliberal capitalism (Walsh 2016). This is captured in Purser and Loy (2013)’s notion of ‘McMindfulness’. By providing an avenue for individual self-care, the ‘mindful worker’ takes the form of the entrepreneurial self, accepting responsibility for their own well-being, but within the conditions and goals of organisational productivity (Purser, Forbes, and Burke 2016). Problematic for Walsh (2016, 158) is how this articulation around the neoliberal subject excises any reflection on ‘the power dynamics informing how mindfulness is practiced, by who, and for what purpose’. Thus, the mainstream framing of mindfulness depoliticises experience and defers any concern with structural relations of power that shape individual experience. Left out of such articulations is the potential contribution of mindfulness practice for collective solidarity and action towards social impact, structural change, or collective well-being.

These critiques raise important points regarding the applicability of mindfulness practices to local participatory urban governance processes in South Africa. The demand that participants experience and aspire for non-judgmental present-moment awareness without any accompanying critical reflection would be inappropriate given the power disparities of different participants. Individual well-being also cannot be extricated from the historical and structural exclusion of the black African majority. Experiences and practices of marginalisation and material deprivation need to be understood in this broader context. In local governance processes, the nature and purpose of public entities is also significant. In contrast to firms, municipalities are public institutions with public servants who have an ethical obligation towards the greater good. Any contemplative practice should therefore be geared, not towards ‘self-help’, but towards cultivating mindsets, principles and practices conducive to more inclusive governance processes to improve material conditions on the ground.
Reframing mindfulness

Acknowledging the above critiques, and welcoming the emerging critical debates, we draw on alternative framings of mindfulness. Many scholars (e.g. Leggett 2021; Stanley 2012; Komjathy 2017; Magee 2016; Chari 2016; Salmenniemi 2019) are similarly interested in the potential of contemplative practices to cultivate other-regarding ethical orientations, collective solidarity and efforts towards social change, or in our case, to transform local governance practices in the interest of social change.

Although mindfulness is an inner-oriented or intra-psychic activity, it foregrounds our co-presence or existing together with others, thereby carrying an integral ethical and political dimension (Schmid and Aiken 2021). Meditation is only one of many practices but one which has gained most attention. Although scientific research on these practices is in early stages (Dahl, Lutz, and Davidson 2015), preliminary evidence suggests contemplative practices can generate or support ‘other-regarding’ emotions and ethical orientations such as empathy, compassion, trust and social connection (Kahane 2009; Luberto et al. 2018). Mindfulness techniques have also been shown to increase one’s sense of relatedness and sense of connection towards strangers (Hutcherson, Seppala, and Gross 2008; Carson et al. 2004).

The Contemplative Social Sciences Research sub-field highlights the potential of contemplative approaches to move from ego-centric towards more eco-centric understandings (Komjathy 2017). According to Kahane (2009), contemplative practices can be useful to teach and learn about social justice and our moral obligations to others, including distant others. Where mindfulness techniques have been applied as a pedagogical tool in teaching and learning (see e.g. Bentz and Giorgino 2016), emerging research suggests students exposed to these approaches are able to go beyond self-awareness to embrace the promotion of social change (Rendon and Kanagala 2014). Mindfulness practice has also been associated with the potential to change how we think about and act upon various local and global crises, including social and ecological crises (Wamsler, Reeder, and Crosweller 2019; Wamsler and Brink 2018).

One may argue that civic actors and social activists – those more likely to be involved in participatory processes with government – already enter such spaces with a strong social justice ethic. What purpose, then, for any contemplative activity? While such a point is valid, it is worth noting that social movements and activists (e.g. Occupy Wallstreet, among others) have employed mindfulness practices as part of their socio-political projects (Chari 2016; Salmenniemi 2019; Schmid and Aiken 2021). In the context of government-community engagement, it is also precisely because stakeholders bring different interests and agendas to the process that an approach that ‘grounds’ discussions in reflective acknowledgement of thoughts, feelings and subjective experiences of reality becomes important.

According to Leggett (2021), empathy and connection toward others also cultivates an openness towards difference and other points of view, which is important for deliberative engagement. In the Higher Education context, Litfin (2020, 57) claims attention to inner worlds and experiences can foster skills for navigating ‘intellectual and emotional ambiguity, embracing diversity, civic discourse, and collaborative action’. Proposing a ‘community-engaged mindfulness’, Magee (2016) suggests such practices operate on three levels: personal, interpersonal and systemic. Increased personal awareness connects to an
increased awareness of the experiences of others (and thus a sense of interconnectedness), further supporting ‘compassionate action’ and efforts to address structural inequality. Whitehead et al. (2016, 558) noted how a mindfulness intervention for civil servants created ‘an interesting space (or pause)’ before engaging rational cognitive processes of interpreting and analysing. This allowed them to notice ‘overlooked (or unfelt) aspects of a situation’, and to reflect more on ‘the broader political and structural conditions of their working environment’. In other words, such practices can help reconcile the individual and social dimensions of our social experiences (Bentz and Giorgino 2016).

In summary, and in contrast to the individualising framings of mindfulness that dominate the field, alternative approaches understand mindfulness through more ethical, political and relational lenses. This literature explores the potential of contemplative practices to improve collective wellbeing, shake entrenched belief systems and foster a social justice consciousness (Peterson 2017). Important to note, is that conceptual approaches privileging particularly Eurocentric contexts seem far removed from social and engagement dynamics of South Africa. Yet it is precisely the cultivation of awareness, openness, and empathy, as qualities and skills conducive to building constructive spaces of reflection and dialogue, that we believe is relevant. However, the mechanisms and evidence of this remain understudied. Still lacking are clear theories with empirical backing that explain how it works (Farias and Wikholm 2016). Therefore, the potential contribution of contemplative practices to improve local governance practices and public administration remains an exciting area for exploration.

**Contemplative practices and participatory local governance**

Community engagement processes in South African local government vary in design and how they unfold in practice, based on the nature and timeframe of the service and project, what communities are engaged and whether there are civic organisations or external facilitators involved (Vivier, De Jongh, and Thompson 2020). Nevertheless, a general pattern of holding a public community meeting followed by a series of smaller ‘project steering committee meetings’ is often the norm. Participants usually include a range of representatives from political and administrative government bodies, NGOs, and informal settlement residents, who greatly differ in their experiences, embodied perceptions, knowledge and power. Since participatory processes need to be attentive to such differences and imbalances, and the field of contemplative studies provides a lens for better understanding the inner dimensions of experience, in this section we apply this lens. We do so by exploring what specific practices could be adapted to a participatory urban governance process and reflecting on some of the opportunities and risks involved.

As previously discussed, addressing primarily the inner and interpersonal dimensions, the field offers many practices available for developing attentiveness, awareness, compassion, concentration and presence, usually rooted in interiority, seclusion and a sense of place (Komjathy 2017). These include activities such as visualisation, journaling, walking, focused experiences in nature, as well as creative, artistic and physical practices like art, photography, music and storytelling.

**Figure 1** below presents *The Tree of Contemplative Practices* developed by the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society (CMind 2014), highlighting the most recognised contemplative practices. The roots encompass the general intentions in which these practices
are grounded and the branches group the different practices. Each of the seven branches depict a different type of activity: stillness, generative, creative, activist, relational, movement, and ritual/cyclical. While The Tree is a product of the cultural and socio-economic context of its authors, it offers a useful starting point for identifying what is possible and underscoring what might be missing in a standard community engagement approach in other contexts. These practices are not inclusive of the broad variety of practices that may be currently invisible to the field, or of the many activities and contexts that could enrich these approaches. Similarly, while there are many methodologies to enhance creativity and inclusion in participatory processes (Chambers 1994), some specific to urban infrastructure planning and local problem-solving (Aditya 2010), for these practices to be contemplative they should involve the cultivation of attention and awareness.

In Table 1 below, we discuss in more detail some of these specific practices, which in our view could enrich participatory meetings and workshops in the South African context. Not all these need to be taken on board. The Table simply offers a range of options, showing the variety of methods and brief moments within a meeting or workshop.

**Figure 1.** The Tree of Contemplative Practices. Source: CMind 2014. The Centre for Contemplative Mind in Society. [permission obtained].

where more attention can be given to participants’ inner experiences. Here, we are also
pushing further our conceptual exploration (or thought experiment, as it were), in the
hope to open avenues for future discussion and research. It is worth noting that while
the process outlined may seem at odds with standard approaches where the methods
used rarely, if ever create a space for participants to interrogate emotions and how
they affect behaviour, perceptions and outcomes, that is precisely the point. Bringing
these kinds of practices into community engagement would not do away with the
more standard aspects such as presentations and technical discussions, but would
rather help by setting the tone and embedding discussions in a space of awareness,
reflection, and more honest conversations.

The suggested practices in Table 1 focus on inner being and the intangible aspects
often neglected in engagement and service delivery processes. We hypothesise potential
transformation through the integration of such a contemplative approach in two areas.
The first area of potential transformation is in the individual experience: by changing

| Table 1. Integrating contemplative practices into Participatory Local Governance. |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| **Contemplative Practices (what)** | **Potential use in Community Engagement Processes (how)** |
| Stillness: | Momsents of silence and quieting the mind, or lightly guided internal reflection to open or close a meeting or workshop, before or after a tea/lunch break, or after a difficult conversation. |
| Grounding exercises | Light guidance to focus attention on the body (physical sensations and breath), and observation of thoughts without holding on to any single thought. |
| Centering | Guided or silent reflection on a chosen issue related to the workshop, service or discussion at that time (e.g. a material challenge, positionality, project process). |
| Relational: | |
| Dialogue and sharing circles | Facilitated dialogues to: 1) agree to guiding norms for the workshop (e.g. respect, listening, learning); 2) unpack participant challenges and expectations around a service/issue; 3) reflect on power disparities, material challenges and positionality. |
| Storytelling | Group or peer conversations where participants share stories related to the material issues/challenges to be dealt with. |
| Deep listening | Light guidance to practice deep and respectful listening: listening without judgment or interruption, asking questions rather than offering answers or solutions. |
| Movement: | |
| Contemplative/ Experiential Community Walks | Group walks through relevant neighbourhoods to: 1) observe and be part of the lived realities of residents; 2) examine together specific service or infrastructure issues. Combines silent walking with discussion and reflection during and after walks. |
| Body movement exercises | Physical exercises such as a guided mental scan to bring attention to the physical experiences by focusing on bodily feelings. This can happen through witnessing gentle moves like standing or walking around the room. |
| Creative: | |
| Journaling (audio or written) | Individual and group journaling (written, audio or graphic) after specific discussions or between meetings and workshops, to give participants moments to reflect on specific questions or issues around the project/service that may be emerging. It will be a pause for reflecting and sharing both within and with others. |
| Artistic activities | Music/art-based activities or physical spaces to provide participants an alternative to discursive thinking. |
| Generative: | |
| Visualization and Gratitude | Guided meditations for taking a pause to acknowledge the structural and material challenges while envisioning the material outcomes needed and a potential action plan. Guided dialogues on interactive exercises focused on appreciating specific issues. For instance acknowledging the agency of residents living in challenging conditions and the institutional constraints that officials face. |
the inner experience and relation to self and ‘the other’ of officials and citizens in participatory processes. The second area of potential transformation is in interpersonal relations: by developing awareness of the subjective experiences of ‘the other’ and fostering constructive relations between key stakeholders. Considering some of the limitations in pursuing a contemplative approach at the individual project level (which we discuss further below), we propose the organisation as a third area of potential transformation. However, as we will discuss, this also brings further risks.

**Potential individual and interpersonal transformation**

At the individual level, the above practices are suggested as a potential way to set a reflective tone from the onset of a workshop, allowing people to check-in with themselves and become more aware of their own thoughts and feelings. Inner individual change in this context is not simply about managing stress and negative emotion and surrendering to unacceptable material realities. Rather, the activities outlined here offer ways for individuals to give more adequate attention to their social realities and experiences in relation to structural constraints, while creating awareness of the emotions these evoke. This becomes possible when embodied feelings and thoughts, and the relation between inner and outer worlds, become the object of reflection (Leggett 2021).

Similarly, at the interpersonal level, through experiential activities such as the group community walks, participants gain an understanding of ‘the other’ lived experiences around service delivery, bringing awareness of the subjective experiences of urban life into more technical considerations. Such physical walk-abouts enable embodied discussions that, we believe, will make participants more attentive to their positionality, both in the workshop and in the local governance context, potentially reinforcing a sense of collective concern and purpose. In our experience, by nurturing awareness and openness in collective spaces such as workshops and through walking methods, the usual separateness and antagonism that often characterises interactions between officials and residents could be bridged, at least temporarily (Reference excluded for blind review).

When participants share and listen from a position of self-awareness (including of power disparities and positionalities), validating different forms of knowledge and collaboration is more likely. In her work and research applying mindfulness practices in the context of structural injustices around race and policing in the U.S., Magee (2016, 430, 436) found that ‘a norm of pausing and creating space together’ can help set intentions around respectful listening and appreciation, and that such activities engendered a ‘felt sense of compassion’, empathy and solidarity. Further, as Legget (2021, 12) argues, an attitude of openness towards difference, and the awareness and reflection on emotion and reason, ‘creates cognitive spaces for different perspectives, or imagining alternatives’. This is important since the exclusion of certain types of knowledge (especially community knowledge) remains a challenge in participatory governance processes (Storey 2014), specially to build collaboration and partnerships. Partnerships, as Peterson notes, are developed not through ‘needs assessment’ approaches but through practices that promote shared understandings, critical dialogue, trust and that value the knowledge and agency of community members (Peterson 2017, 137–139).

Contemplative practices have the potential to create awareness to challenge dominant discourses and shift norms around what counts as legitimate knowledge and who counts...
as a ‘knowing subject’ (Salmenniemi 2019). Going beyond discursive activities, as proposed above, stimulates creativity and spontaneity (Rieken 2019), while setting the tone for constructive reflection and ideas for solutions.

From the South African local engagement context, there are limitations and risks to be acknowledged. These are visible particularly at the personal level, and at the governance or systemic level. Firstly, at the individual level, there is a risk that contemplative practices bring up difficult experiences and emotions, especially as historical injustices of apartheid continue to shape relations and material conditions. According to Farias and Wikholm (2016), people react differently to such techniques. Increasing awareness of difficult feelings and memories might cause distress. Such practices would therefore need to be managed by a properly trained practitioner who can identify and address any emerging adverse experiences.

Secondly, at the urban governance or systemic level, bringing such practices into specific participatory projects will not be a panacea to the many challenges of service delivery. Applying a few contemplative activities through a single project only, would not affect material conditions. Moreover, since local government institutions retain the power to define the principles and aims guiding participatory processes, any tangible outcomes will be limited by these. Therefore, a major risk is that such practices are used to promote institutional structures and organisational approaches that instead of aiming to improve societal wellbeing, prioritise individual responsibility, cost efficiency and the maintenance of a dysfunctional bureaucratic and normative status quo. Most importantly, while more aware and empathetic citizens and public officials is a positive outcome on its own, systemic and institutional arrangements at the organisational level also need to be challenged and transformed.

**Potential organisational transformation**

One avenue to address this risk and enhance potential at the systemic level is to bring contemplative practices into the municipal organisation itself. The literature on ‘mindful organising’ suggests mindfulness practices can improve an organisation’s collective capacity to read the environment and respond to emerging situations (Weick and Putnam 2006). In practical terms, this could involve bringing into administrative and project meetings similar activities as discussed in Table 1 to nurture presence, awareness and deep listening. Such an approach can set a different tone to explore how officials are coping or not with their mandates, and acknowledge the emotional impacts of delivering and maintaining services in marginalised areas. Performance management indicators, skills development plans and broader project processes could also be infused with relevant contemplative approaches. Creating institutional spaces imbued with contemplative principles can open opportunities for more dialogues, exchanges and networking between officials from various departments. This could facilitate more creative and caring thinking/doing, and most important, also internal collaborations.

Overall, the systemic and structural problems of participatory local governance are complex. Identifying, adapting and embedding contemplative practices into governance systems and organisations is a valuable transformational pathway to explore. Since individual, interpersonal, organisational and systemic areas of transformation are interdependent and not linear, the specific ways in which they interact require rigorous research and
experimentation. Notwithstanding the risks, such as the instrumentalisation of these approaches by the ethic of neoliberalism (Stanley 2012; Walsh 2016; Purser and Loy 2013), there is promising research suggesting that alternative values and agendas can be introduced and circulated in an organisation via a contemplative approach. For instance, in their empirical study of how mindfulness is discursively constituted within organisational settings, Islam, Holm, and Karjalainen (2017) conclude that, though fragile, the possibility of maintaining the emancipatory potential of alternative framings always remains. Contemplative practices offer broader, complementary perspectives and practical approaches for designing a more comprehensive transformational pathway towards more meaningful community engagement and local governance processes.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, we have argued that existing participatory governance tools could be adapted to address the affective and relational dimensions of local governance. The field of contemplative studies offers insights towards an integrative approach that bridges the individual and the collective, the inner and the outer and the relational and the emotional aspects of governance. Therefore, there is scope, we argue, to use contemplative knowledge and practices to nurture more awareness, reflection and valuing the experiences and knowledge of ‘the other’ in community engagement processes.

Given the gaps and limitations around the organisational aspect and its centrality for actual changes, understanding how institutional and organisational constraints could be overcome, seems fundamental. Efforts here should acknowledge the materiality of service delivery and participatory processes in South Africa and be grounded in ethical considerations. Similarly, assessing whether and how contemplative approaches strengthen community-based organisations, collectives and movements remains another area worthy of exploration.

Overall, bringing contemplative studies into governance and community engagement opens exciting new areas for research. Mindfulness is not a common area of research in political science, public administration or governance studies. Testing the use of contemplative approaches in contexts such as informal settlements and in community engagement processes, presents a unique opportunity for the contemplative studies field to learn further about how to connect our internal and external worlds in complex collective social processes constrained by material and structural issues.

Contemplative social scientists, mainstream social scientists and governance practitioners should embrace a contemplative knowledge lens to develop new understandings on the potential and adequate applications of these approaches. This can result in adapting contemplative practices or developing new practices to enhance participatory governance processes. We argue that this integrative approach invites a fundamental reconfiguration of principles and practices, and envisions the potential development of a more ‘contemplative or caring governance’. Developing the tenets of such an approach seems an area worthy of exploration. The possibilities for disciplines such as public administration and contemplative knowledge to collaborate in the co-production of new transformative pathways to improve the quality of local governance seems urgent and is open for fresh thinking and exploration.
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