"Let us be led by the residents": Swedish dialogue experts' stories about power, justification and ambivalence

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the practices of an emerging group of practitioners in Swedish urban governance: dialogue experts. As dialogical ideals have been mainstreamed in planning policies, civil servants and governance consultants have been increasingly commissioned to engage in dialogue with citizens within public deliberation, planning consultations or citizens budgeting. Even though these practitioners influence the whys, whats and hows of urban development, their practices remain curiously under-explored in Nordic urban studies. Dialogue experts experience the practical dilemma of being experts in a practice that has developed as a reaction to expert-rule and top-down power. We inquire into this dilemma together with a group of dialogue experts who work within an urban development scheme in the district of Gottsunda in Uppsala, Sweden. We ask: *how do dialogue experts make sense of their use of power in dialogues with citizens?* We explore whether analysing dialogue practice through the concepts of power and justification might explain the practical dilemmas confronted by dialogue experts. By engaging in joint inquiry with the practitioners in a series of focus groups, we learn that the practitioners are inclined to critique power relations that exclude marginalised voices from urban planning but find it more difficult to justify their own use of power in pursuit of a more inclusive governance system. The dialogue experts employ two types of justification for their use of power: an *advocative* justification, which revolves around aspirations to change the planning system to include marginalised voices, and a more conventional *bureaucratic* justification, by which they merely execute the will of elected politicians and follow established planning procedures. Even so, the practitioners remain ambivalent about their use of power. Hence, we demonstrate how power theory and joint inquiry between practitioners and researchers can shed new light on the practical dilemmas in dialogue practice.

Keywords
Dialogue practitioners, justification, power, urban governance, urban planning, planners

Introduction

Policy makers and scholars promote citizen participation and public deliberation as key strategies for urban transformations. The rationale is that the inclusion of citizens in urban governance can revitalise democracy, lead urban dwellers to accept contested decisions and make their everyday practices more sustainable (see Lindholm et al., 2015; Sager, 2012; Jodoin et al., 2015). Based on such assumptions, dialogical ideals have been mainstreamed in Swedish governance frameworks as well as on the European and Global level (SFS, 2018: 1370; UNECE, 1998; UN, 2015).

The mainstreaming of dialogical ideals has given rise to an emerging category of governance practitioners: "dialogue experts" (Bherer et al., 2017; Chilvers, 2008, 2013; Ernits, 2018). They *design* deliberation and participation by making choices about the whys, wheres, whens and hows of dialogues; they *facilitate* communication between actors with diverging worldviews; and they *evaluate* dialogues and filter out which inputs reach decision-making (see Chilvers & Kearnes, 2020; Escobar, 2015; Svensson, 2017). Dialogue experts work in different sectors and organisations (such as NGOs, the government and consulting firms) and often play an influential role in urban transformations (Westin, 2019), yet their practices remain under explored in urban studies (Bherer et al., 2017). The emerging nature of this governance profession makes our study timely and potentially enables us to contribute to developing the conceptual underpinnings of Nordic dialogue practice in urban settings.

Urban transformations are characterised by struggles over meaning and power asymmetries. Even so, dialogue practices are most often conceptualised as consensual and egalitarian, and the role of the dialogue expert is described as a neutral facilitator rather than a governance professional in a position of power (McGuirk, 2001; Westin, 2019). This conceptual gap between the ideals of dialogue and the reality of urban governance has led critics to claim that dialogues are naïve and power-blind (Purcell, 2009; Richardson, 1996). Instead of renewed democracy and sustainability, critical scholars claim that the result of deliberation and participation may, in fact, be depoliticisation and false consensus (e.g., Franzén et al., 2016).

The purpose of this paper is to analyse how Swedish dialogue experts make sense of power relations with citizens and how they justify their use of power. We elicit and analyse practitioners' stories about practical dilemmas they faced in dialogues with citizens during the transformation of the Gottsunda district in Uppsala. Our intention is not to repeat the well-rehearsed power critique but to explore whether conceptualising dialogue practice in terms of power might strengthen the conceptual underpinnings of the emerging profession of *dialogue expert*. With that intention in mind, we employ recent thinking about power and justification (Forst, 2017; Haugaard, 2018) to shed light on the practitioners' stories. The overarching research question is: *how do dialogue experts make sense of their use of power in dialogues with citizens?*

We lay out our argument by first explaining how dialogue experts have problems with power due to being professionals in a practice that has at its core the aim of deconstructing authority. We seek to address the problem by introducing novel thinking about the links between power and better or worse justification. Section 3 presents our approach: to inquire into practice stories from dialogue experts via a series of focus groups. Section 4 describes how the dialogue experts are inclined to critique the use of power but find it difficult to justify their own use of it in making the governance system more inclusive. In Section 5, we explain how the findings shed new light on a core dilemma for dialogue experts: how to be professionals in a practice grounded in the critique of professional forms of knowledge.

Dialogue experts, power and justification

Dialogue is an ambiguous, yet positively loaded, term. In theories of communicative planning and deliberative democracy, dialogue most often signifies communication that approximates Habermasian (Habermas, 1984; 1985) criteria of openness, comprehensiveness, trustworthiness, and honesty (Bächtiger et al., 2007; Sager, 2018). In Swedish urban governance policy and practice, actors tend to use dialogue more loosely as a positively loaded term referring to communication that is distinctively different from everyday speech. Dialogue is used as a Swiss army knife in Swedish governance: a tool capable of solving many different kinds of problems, ranging from conflict management and renewal of democracy to technical and social innovation (Hertting & Hellquist, 2021; Hallgren et al., 2018).

The mainstreaming of dialogical ideals in urban governance has resulted in increased demand for dialogue competence. Such competence includes the skills to design, facilitate and evaluate communicative processes capable of establishing trust and mutual understanding between actors with divergent world views (Bherer et al., 2017; Forester, 1999; Westin et al., 2020). Hence, a category of dialogue practitioners who possess, develop, and use dialogue competence is emerging in Sweden. This kind of practitioner is known by many names in governance literature, such as *facilitator* (Moore, 2012; Westin et al., 2014), *deliberative practitioner* (Forester, 1999), *public participation professional* (Bherer et al., 2017), *deliberative bureaucrat* (Puustinen, Mäntysalo, Hytönen, et al., 2017) or *cross-sector strategist* (Svensson, 2017). In this paper, we chose to call them "dialogue experts". *Dialog* (dialogue) is the key governance concept that gives these actors their "reason to be" in Swedish governance. Calling them "experts" draws attention to the central dilemma of being a professional in a practice that is grounded in the critique of professional expertise (see Allmendinger, 2009; Mik-Meyer & Haugaard, 2019; Moore, 2017). Currently, the meaning of dialogue practice in Sweden is far from stabilised and settled. Even so, dialogue competence is in the process of being institutionalised, for example through the establishment of professional positions in the public and private sector as well as within academia and civil society and through the development of university courses, in-service training and professional networks.

Dialogue experts work in the public sector as well as civil society and consultancies. Although these practitioners share similarities, their methods differ depending on their position and the institutional settings they operate in. In this paper, we inquire into the practices of public sector practitioners within urban planning. Studying public sector practitioners suits our purpose because their position as representatives of the local government activates dialogue experts' core dilemma. These dialogue experts operate from positions inside the urban planning machinery as representatives of the local government, yet they are also supposed to facilitate dialogue practices that are based on critiquing top-down planning and professional forms of knowledge (see Allmendinger, 2009; Westin & Hellquist, 2018). Moore (2012) usefully terms this dilemma "following from the front" to underscore the way that these practitioners work by following the lead of other actors despite being in leadership positions themselves.

In this paper, we apply recent thinking within power theory to conceptualise this dilemma. We problematise the tendency in dialogue practice to merely view conflictual, hierarchical power as undesirable and instead stress the links between the use of power and justifications, which can be normatively assessed as better or worse (Forst, 2017; Haugaard, 2015; Haugaard, 2018).

> Power over constitutes a duality whereby the very same process which leads to domination also constitutes the conditions of possibility for democracy, and thus is normatively desirable. … It is not sufficient to identify processes of domination and try to deconstruct them. Rather, the task is the more complex one of deciding when the very same process of power is desirable and when it constitutes domination.
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> *Haugaard, 2015, p. 147*

In our view, a core problem in dialogue practice is the over-reliance on, often unspoken, notions of *power with* (Westin, 2019). When power is understood in terms of *power with*, the emphasis is on agreement – or even consensus – and concerted action. The preference for *power with* in dialogue might lead advocates of dialogue-based governance to attempt to do away with conflictual *power over* altogether (e.g. Booher & Innes, 2002; Innes & Booher, 2015). In this paper, we instead zoom in on *power over* as being an inherent part of social interactions — as well as in dialogical practices within urban governance — and, hence, a phenomenon which carries both negative and positive normative potential (see Haugaard, 2015; Mansbridge, 2012). We explore how a more nuanced understanding of power relations in dialogue practice might shed light on dialogue experts' practical dilemmas. For these reasons, our inquiry focuses on relations of *power over* rather than *power with*.

In line with this reasoning, the kind of *power over* relations we are interested in occurs, á la Robert Dahl (1957), when actor A motivates actor B to think or do something that B would otherwise not have thought or done (see Forst, 2015). Given the emphasis on reason in dialogue practice and participatory theories, it is suitable for our purposes to see *power over* as a cognitive phenomenon that includes justification (Haugaard, 2018, p. 93). To be a subject of power is, then, "to be moved by reasons that others have given me and that motivate me to think or act in a certain way intended by the reason-giver" (Forst, 2015, p. 112). Hence, according to this view, power is the ability to "influence, use, determine, occupy, or even seal off the space of reasons for others" (Forst, 2015, p. 112–117). Cognitive justification is thereby central to understanding and normatively appraising relations of power.

The success of an attempt by actor A to exercise *power over* actor B hinges on the extent to which the justification provided by A is, tacitly or explicitly, accepted by B. The effectiveness of justifications is determined by how they resonate with deeply embedded ideas about social relations that have assumed a taken-for-granted status through historical interactions in a specific practice, such as urban governance (see Forst, 2017; Healey, 2012). The power of justification — the reasons for how urban governance relations are performed — can be considered as social facts that can be normatively appraised as better or worse. Hence, *power over* is not inherently good or bad but is an integral part of human relations, and of dialogue practice.

We conceptualise *power over* as operating in three dimensions based on the classic power debates from the 1950s to the 1970s and further developed and applied by many in the power and planning literature (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962; Dahl, 1957; Forester, 1989; Haugaard, 2018; Lukes, 1974, 2005; Schmidt-Thomé & Mäntysalo, 2014).

Table 1 The dimensions of power over applied to dialogue practice (see Gaventa, 2006; Haugaard, 2012)

Dimension of power over	Definition
1-D power over	Visible exercises of power where actors get other actors to do what they otherwise would not have done.
2-D power over	Hidden processes of power, which determine who gets into the participatory process and what gets on the agenda.
3-D power over	"Invisible" processes of power, which shape the psychological and ideological boundaries of participation.

We utilise these three dimensions of power to interpret practical dilemmas in dialogue practice together with a group of dialogue experts in the district of Gottsunda in Uppsala.

Approach to researching dialogue experts' dilemmas

The Gottsunda neighbourhood is of significant relevance to the development of Uppsala, Sweden's fourth largest city. It was first developed in the 1960s as part of a large nationwide project to address housing shortages (The Million Programme) and is a strategically relevant neighbourhood as current plans aim at developing it into a major hub in the south of the city. Gottsunda is also a somewhat challenged neighbourhood, as identified by national classifications, which describe it as an area with a high level of exclusion and segregation. 60 percent of the residents of Gottsunda have an immigrant background, and one-third of residents are under the age of 24, contributing to a population demographic with specific needs. Another aspect that contributes to feelings of exclusion is the fact that there is a notable disparity between Gottsunda and its surrounding areas in terms of income, wealth and education (Uppsala Municipality, 2018). These specific challenges serve as a backdrop for the work of a group of dialogue experts and make this an interesting case for urban studies.

In the past decade, development in Gottsunda culminated in the approval of plans to build 7000 housing units in the area. As part of the process of approving this programme, planners in the municipality's planning department began to experiment with implementing innovative forms of participatory planning. Our analysis focuses on the activities of practitioners in a team of dialogue experts working within the larger planning process. The local government mandated this team to innovate dialogue practices. The practitioners developed methods and approaches intended to renew local democracy by including groups of residents who rarely participate in the planning process. Within mainstream Swedish urban planning, participation is realised through formalised and highly structured consultations with those living in the area subject to planning. The dialogue experts are commissioned to develop more informal and less structured forms of dialogue. They experiment with alternative agendas and novel forms of conversation and engage in interactions with residents in the social settings where they lead their everyday lives.

The research process started when one of the dialogue experts contacted the main author with the intention of initiating a joint learning process between municipal civil servants and researchers. Through conversations over the course of the spring 2020, we started to jointly inquire about the practitioners' stories of meaningful interactions with residents in Gottsunda. This paper presents the findings from the analysis of the stories shared by two of the dialogue experts, who have been given the pseudonyms Anna and Cecilia. Both are early-career civil servants in Uppsala municipality. Anna is educated in urban planning and

Cecilia in political science. As such, their sense-making can provide insights into contemporary perceptions of power relations among Swedish dialogue experts. One of the stories originates from a semi-formal dialogue with youths in Gottsunda and the other from attending an informal party with local residents. The two stories provide possibilities for analysing dialogue practices in different social settings.

As researchers, we took the already identified general dilemma of "following from the front" (see Moore, 2012 and Section 2) as our starting point for inquiry into the practitioners' specific stories. We wished to explore if analysing their experiences in terms of power and justification might shed light on a core dilemma in dialogue practice. Inspired by Forester's (1999; 2009) practitioner profiles and reflective practice (Gibbs, 1988; Schön, 1983; Yanow & Tsoukas, 2009), we engaged in joint inquiry with the practitioners, guided by the following research question: *how do dialogue experts make sense of their use of power in dialogues with citizens?* In pursuit of an answer to the question, we first asked Anna and Cecilia to recall a meaningful situation they had recently confronted in a dialogue.[1] Reflecting on the story, the practitioners (in written form) described (1) what happened, (2) what they thought and felt, (3) what was good and what was bad in this situation, (4) what they could have done differently and (5) what they would do if they ended up in a similar situation again. Following this initial reflection, the research team held three focus group discussions where the practitioners' stories were interpreted.

The first focus group discussed why these stories might be meaningful to these dialogue experts. The conversation was facilitated by the lead author and one of the co-authors and was attended by additional members of the research team and five members of the team of dialogue practitioners (including Anna and Cecilia). At this focus group, the researchers did not supply theoretical power concepts to interpret the stories but rather focused the discussion on the meaning that the practitioners attached to them.

The second focus group took place a couple of months later and was facilitated by the same researchers. This focus group was organised within a research and development programme, and a wider group of 14 participants attended, including the team of Gottsunda dialogue practitioners, practitioners from other Swedish municipalities, professional facilitators, and researchers. The facilitators structured the conversation according to the three dimensions of power and moved the conversation from the empirical explanation of power towards justification of the use of power in accordance with the theoretical ideas in Section 2.

Following the second focus group, the video recordings from the sessions were transcribed and analysed by the research team, and the preliminary findings were identified. We followed interpretive research methodology and paid attention to how the practitioners used definitions, narratives, metaphors, terms of praise, and belittling and recurrent vocabulary (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2013; Westin, 2019). The analysis of the first workshop was guided by the analytical question: *how is the dilemma of "following from the front" expressed in the stories and during the focus group?* The analysis of the second workshop was guided by the analytical question: *how do the practitioners understand the three dimensions of power over and how do they justify their use of power?*

The purpose of the third focus group was to validate and modify the research team's preliminary findings. The research team presented and discussed these findings together with

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1.   Initially, this process also included the story of a third practitioner; however, he later went on paternity leave and could not attend the second and third focus groups. Hence, we focus the analysis on the two remaining practitioners' stories.

Anna, Cecilia and an additional practitioner who belongs to the dialogue team working in Gottsunda. This focus group was facilitated by the lead author and the second author. Based on the discussions, we revisited and modified our preliminary interpretations based on the feedback from the dialogue experts.

Findings: ambivalence towards power relations

Focus group 1: how is the dilemma of "following from the front" expressed?

> • In focus group 1, the practitioners discuss the meaning of the stories without an explicit theory of power. We analyse how the general dilemma of "following from the front" is expressed in the stories and during the focus group conversations.

Anna: a story about youth resistance

This story takes place during a workshop with pupils at one of the schools in Gottsunda. The team of dialogue experts planned and facilitated the workshop. Their intention was to provide opportunities for youths in Gottsunda to discuss plans for their area prior to the formal consultation meetings that were due to take place at a later date. Anna's story revolves around an episode that took place during the workshop. She explains, "We were holding a workshop for kids, and during the short introduction, one of the kids protested 'Don't ruin Gottsunda!'"

During the first focus group, the practitioners expressed ambivalence when discussing the story. Anna says:

> At first, I thought it was great that she had heard about [the plans for Gottsunda] and had opinions about them, and that she was brave enough to say right out what she thought. Then, I started to reflect. It is hard for someone of her age to know what this is really about. Did she understand, or was this just something she had heard at home or elsewhere and repeated without understanding? Kids can be like that.

In the continued conversations about the story, the practitioners reflected critically on the habitual ways they performed dialogues. They paid attention to how they, as representatives from the municipality, steer the dialogues by structuring the conversations and problematised how they might thereby influence them too much.

> It got me thinking that maybe we sometimes need to carry out dialogues without actively steering them but rather letting them be steered by the dialogue itself. We are really focused on asking questions and getting answers to them. So that is sort of what I was reflecting upon: that I would want to take time to consider her question, but it felt like I could have sabotaged the whole layout. (Anna)

The practitioners agreed that they think the story taught them that they should take a step back and let citizens influence the dialogues more often. One of Anna's colleagues elaborated:

> But I think, the layout is ours and the question that I have is this: can we actually fail? . . . [We think] 'Oh now we have 44 minutes left, how should we solve this?' But [the residents] don't even know that we have a plan. How can we be more adaptable in such situations?

Anna continued her critical reflection by problematising her habit of justifying the direction of the plan to develop Gottsunda when challenged by residents.

> I caught myself thinking directly that I should argue for why we are doing this, instead of just accepting what [the girl said]. … Then it isn't really a dialogue because you are putting the other person in a position where they must either take back something or acknowledge what we are saying.

In our interpretation, the conversations about this story show how the dilemma of "following from the front" takes shape in the interactions with the pupil at a semi-structured workshop. The dialogue experts acknowledge that they are professionals with the responsibility of planning and facilitating the workshop with the pupils. As such, they inevitably occupy leadership positions, which involves making choices about the purpose and agenda of the workshop. At the same time, the practitioners also acknowledge the necessity of being open to changing the agenda and allowing participants to express their views, influence the topics and the ways dialogue is conducted. This dual positioning of the dialogue experts explains Anna's ambivalence when the pupil voices her criticism of the plans for Gottsunda.

Cecilia: a story about building trust at a local party

Cecilia's story is about an episode where she joined a local party attended by residents of Gottsunda.

> We were a pair [of practitioners] who were invited to a private event/party for women. The event was being held for a woman who had completed a pilgrimage to Mecca and was celebrating by having a Hajj party for her female friends. We had the benefit of having a dialogue station at the party. About 100 women and children attended. We had put up paper on the walls by our station [where opinions and comments from the guests could be collected and displayed] and could carry out conversations, but we also sat at different tables, had conversations and took notes. (Cecilia)

Attending the party was something outside of the mould of conventional consultation meetings and the kind of semi-structured dialogue activities described in Anna's story. The party brought together women and children living in Gottsunda. In this instance, however, the role of the practitioners had shifted compared to Anna's story because, although they were given room to present themselves and ask questions, they were not the hosts of the event and therefore did not have the same type of role as in typical dialogue activities.

> What I was thinking about was: we are now meeting with a target group that we often discuss having difficulty in reaching. … It was not our context but rather we were invited guests, which was quite generous.

Cecilia reflected on the fact that she was outside of her usual domain as practitioner and, instead, performing the role of an invited guest. This influenced her behaviour and led her to question how much space she could take.

> We started to question how much space we could take up in this situation. … But I thought that it was really good to be in these everyday situations and to have a different type of conversation. That was my main reflection: that it became more of a relationship-building opportunity. …

How often do we pick up on these everyday stories and, like, meet at eye level rather than doing a workshop where we collect different positions and rework them?

Cecilia expressed that she appreciated how operating outside of the structured planning process provides opportunities for building trustful relationships with residents. On the other hand, she also experienced tension between her professional persona and the informal nature of the party.

I think that it can be such that a bit of relationship building can also, in some way, even out the information/power balance. … I have in any event not considered them to be personal relationships, but they are of course. … But I thought about it more as my representing the municipality and sharing our reasoning on how we think about different things and different choices, and which processes we are now in.

Cecilia also felt ambivalent about her role in this interaction – particularly in light of the emphasis on relationship building – and questioned the use of traditional facilitation tools, including post-it notes and managed discussions. As with the story about the school pupil, this leads to critical consideration of her habitual practices. She reflected upon how the practitioners' use of bureaucratic language might work to create barriers in dialogues with citizens.

It is difficult to find a good way to simply and quickly explain what we are doing so that people can understand without using concepts such as 'dialogue' and 'city development'. We might think that those terms are basic, but, in reality, it is not obvious what they mean.

The practitioners are self-critical in that they are aware that the type of language it is normal for them to use can make it more difficult for residents to participate in dialogues. Cecilia expressed an interest in altering practices that may build barriers in favour of being more accessible in their conversations. Yet, the conversations also demonstrate that there is an ambivalence caused by the dual positioning of the dialogue experts as both "guests" at the party and as representatives of the municipality in charge of a planning process which will greatly affect the everyday lives of the party's attendees. As a result, we find that the dilemma of "following from the front" is also present in this story.

Focus group 2: how do the practitioners understand the three dimensions of power over and how do they justify their use of power?

> • The researchers facilitate the discussion around the three dimensions of *power over*. The practitioners identify how they used all three dimensions of *power over* in the stories. The practitioners employ two different kinds of justification for their use of power: one where they claim to operate within a democratic structured planning system and one where they use their agency to change these planning structures in order to make dialogues more inclusive.

When discussing how to explain the use of power in the two stories, the practitioners agreed that these stories exemplified how they use *power over* in all three dimensions: "When I saw those three dimensions, I thought that they are present in almost all of our dialogues" (Anna).

We decide the occasions, arrange the conversations and invite people, so we are already deciding if we should be open to anyone who might want to come and see us. Otherwise, they don't have

the same opportunities, or they don't know that they have the opportunity to do it. And then with the questions we ask because we can't handle everything that comes in. And we always set the agenda. That is all three dimensions. (Anna)

Anna reflected upon the situation with the girl during the workshop at the school and sees it as an example of how the practitioners exercise power based on well-established assumptions about what is good and desirable (see 3D power in Chapter 2).

> We talk about 'development' and not 'destruction', but it could be experienced completely differently by the citizens. And we always look at these types of comments through the eyes of city planners. … We try to always show [the citizens] the good side.

Hence, the conversation about the three dimensions of power indicates that the practitioners found it useful to reflect on their practical dilemmas in the two stories based on power theory. Distinguishing between direct use of 1D *power over* and less agent-specific 2- and 3D *power over* has explanatory value in both stories. Importantly, introducing these ideas from power theory draws the practitioners' attention to how power is always present during dialogues and underscores how their dilemmas cannot be resolved by "escaping from *power over*", even if the emphasis on *power with* in dialogue practice seems to lead to that mistaken conclusion.

After the discussions about three-dimensional *power over*, the researchers intervened in the conversation to point out that the practitioners' use of power raises normative questions about legitimacy and justification. One researcher pointed out that when there is a disagreement, someone needs to decide what to do while another suggested that it is inevitable that the municipality and the planners use power and questions when this use of power is legitimate.

Following these interventions from the researchers, the conversation turned towards justifications of the use of power. In our interpretation, two different kinds of justification (see Chapter 2) were present in the practitioners' conversation: dialogue experts use *power over* within structured planning processes in order to fulfil their positions within a democratic system *or* dialogue experts use *power over* to change the planning system in order to make dialogues more inclusive. The first *bureaucratic* justification was expressed when Anna talked about her role in the beginning of the planning process (when the dialogue with the school pupils took place).

> In this specific project, I was the one who compiled the ideas and opinions. I didn't think that I should do any interpreting. For example, there were some kids who wanted to have a zoo in Gottsunda centre. We already knew that it was impossible, but I thought I should write it down in my report anyway. It is not my job to judge when I compile opinions. Maybe, when I am answering them, it is my job to say that it is not possible because [the zoo would not be] economically sustainable for the municipality. But in the report, I shouldn't edit out what I think … it is a different role to report than to answer.

Furthermore, still employing the *bureaucratic* justification, Anna explained how she follows a structured process when she uses agenda-setting power (2D power).

> Then come the opinions on, for example, social services or health care: things that we aren't even responsible for. As a planning architect, I have a hard time passing such opinions onto where

they should go. … I think that when we organise [the dialogue] in a specific way it is because we think that it will make it more legitimate. We talk about what is topical. And, in that way, we inform the citizens: 'Oh, so we are talking about this because it is this subject that we are able to influence in our work now.' That is what is open.

Besides the *bureaucratic* justification, the practitioners justified their power with reference to changing the planning structures: making the planning process more inclusive. The practitioners thought that the formal consultation meetings were mainly attended by privileged people. Hence, they justified use of power *advocatively*.

> We have even thought about raising and giving legitimacy to the perspectives that came in during early dialogues. We take these up in the consultation report so that the politicians actually see them and so that those perspectives don't … get left to one side; it forces us to give answers even on those views. … It is about trying to broaden the participation in the planning process in some way. (Anna)

This quote exemplifies an *advocative* justification that goes beyond the established consultation processes to change the structures. No longer is the practitioner's role solely that of a bureaucrat who implements already established planning structures and procedures. When they employ this justification, the practitioners emphasise that they want to include alternative voices in the dialogues. They are, then, expressing a desire to change the dialogues in order to deal with the problem of the majority of participants "[being in a better] a better socioeconomic position and such. It is our job to include all the others more. Then, I think [the dialogue] becomes more legitimate" (Anna).

Even if the practitioners, prompted by the researchers' questions, explicitly discussed and sought to justify their use of power, towards the end of the workshop Anna returned to the core theme of focus group 1 by toying with the idea of doing away with power altogether.

> The three dimensions of power; they are really interesting. How would it be if we let go of all of the three dimensions? What is a dialogue then? What is needed for it? That is something to think about.

Turning to the discussion of Cecilia's story, we note that the *advocative* justification is initially emphasised as Cecilia explains her use of power with reference to how it helps to make the planning process more inclusive:

> Yes, well I think that … there is, in a way, a visible power dimension because we came [to the party], and were representing the municipality, and we talked about things that are going to happen, and … we would like to have a conversation about it. So that is the visible part, but I don't think that it is normal practice to meet municipal representatives or civil servants in this way in other cultures. It may not be normal practice to meet civil servants so often at all.

Cecilia emphasised that not all residents may be equally aware of their ability to influence municipal development by participating in dialogues. Residents who have never had this type of contact with civil servants might not understand that dialogues are regular stages in such developments. In this way, Cecilia evokes the *advocative* justification by emphasising how this specific outreach activity helps to level the playing field between actors who regularly attend conventional consultation meetings and those who do not know they have the opportunity to do so.

Later on in the conversation, Cecilia also employed the *bureaucratic* justification for power use.

> Yeah, I think that we are in an exploratory phase of dialogues. We notice when we fall back into doing dialogues in a traditional way. We have, of course, strong political directives to conduct a lot of dialogue and participation.

Hence, this focus group displays how the dialogue experts are ambivalent towards their use of *power over* and how they seek to justify their wielding of power through *bureaucratic* and *advocative* justification. The application of the three dimensions of *power over* explains how the practitioners' dilemma of following from the front cannot be resolved once and for all. Their use of power to structure dialogues and set agendas might be loosened but cannot be "given away". In terms of the three dimensions, it is inevitable that the practitioners use 1- and 2D *power over* due to their positioning in the third dimension of power as representatives of the local planning authority. Hence, the question for these practitioners is not only *how can we empower the citizens* but also *how can we justify our use of power in pursuit of empowering the citizens?*

Focus group 3: validating and nuancing the findings

> • The researchers present preliminary findings, and these are validated and further nuanced by the practitioners. It is confirmed that the dilemma of "following from the front" can be conceptualised in terms of power. The practitioners also validate the identified bureaucratic and advocative justifications but are still ambivalent towards their own use of power.

First, one of the researchers explored why the practitioners seem to want to let go of power by asking, "why are you curious about what would happen if the municipality let go of its power in all three dimensions?" Anna responded by drawing attention to certain inequalities.

> When you look at the other participants, they are not all in the same situation. It is not always equal. We have started reflecting quite a lot upon power in this way. We often receive negative opinions from citizens at the meetings we have. It becomes quite natural to think about our role. When we ask specific questions in dialogues, we are already steering what is being discussed.

To probe further into this theme a researcher asked, "If you gave up control of setting the agenda, who would decide then? What would happen?" The way that the conversation unfolded thereafter demonstrates how the dilemma of "following from the front" can be expressed in terms of power. To be a dialogue expert is to be in a position of power in a practice that involves levelling power imbalances.

> If we open up for different themes, then we need to have some kind of internal coordination. I mean, we need to be prepared to keep a record of all of the opinions that we take in from different forums. … If our work is to lead to any changes then we need to find ways to make sure that someone takes notice of citizens' opinions. (Anna)

This quote shows how the practitioners recognise that the municipality and its civil servants, due to the Swedish municipal "planning monopoly", are in justifiable positions of power. In this example, their position is justified because there is a need for structured planning pro-

cesses in order to gather and organise opinions on proposed plans. On the other hand, the practitioners are also inclined to want to let go of that power with the intention of empowering the citizens.

> We have employed concepts like 'let the residents lead us.' We have some idea that we don't always have to set the agenda, but we don't know exactly how to do this. Maybe the agenda can be looser in theme or form? … We thought, for example, that if we are going to do a safety walk, instead of pre-planning the route, we can let our residents lead us towards what is interesting for us to know. Then we have some kind of framing. There should be a context but maybe the agenda setting is looser. Maybe we get more relevant answers. Maybe we aren't asking the best questions. (Cecilia)

As exemplified here, the practitioners are attempting to chart a middle way in order to manage their ambivalence. They want to hold on to certain agenda setting (2D) power while, at the same time, providing space for citizens to influence what is discussed, how it is discussed and what is done during interactions between planners and residents.

Next, the discussion turned to the researchers' preliminary interpretation of two different kinds of justifications: the *bureaucratic* and the *advocative*. The practitioners validated the interpretation and added nuance.

> Yes, I recognise myself [in these justifications]. But these two motives overlap: when I try to change processes and routines, I do it based on my own experience but also based on political will. The fact that there is a political will to enhance participation is really important. Otherwise, it is hard for us to encourage the development work within our regular work. (Anna)

Anna clarified that there is a mandate from elected politicians to change the planning structures so that they become more inclusive. She further emphasised that the dialogue experts can justify their use of power in different ways, depending on what the situation at hand requires.

> I think that we can have slightly different roles depending [on the situation]. We may feel that there is a need for change as planners and try to make it happen. And then we can be activists if there is [internal municipal] resistance and try to convince and actually explain why this change must be made. We become activists, but it is not the only role that we have. Now I think back to the goal and the budget: there is also a mandate to work with increased participation in the municipality and in planning.

Cecilia then emphasised that they have a political mandate to make the planning processes more inclusive. She explained how their experiments with new forms of dialogue are within their mandate from the elected politicians. The practitioners do not believe that their use of power in the early phase of planning (where the events in their stories took place) was controversial to the politicians. Nevertheless, there might be resistance from colleagues in other positions of responsibility towards the dialogue experts' attempts to promote dialogical ways of working.

> I think that it can be controversial when you want to introduce it as a routine. Then maybe your colleagues have different opinions around it, and maybe they don't think it is as important as we do. (Anna)

With reference to the practitioners' attendance at the Hajj party, Anna elaborated on the potential resistance towards their attempts to increase participation.

> I think that relationship building is really interesting, but not everyone is sold on the idea. I think about how we often need to argue for resources, and using our time on these things can be harder to justify than using it to hold community meetings. . . . Resistance maybe doesn't stem from the question of whether we should work with participation but rather how we should do it – because people have slightly different opinions about that.

Finally, Anna and Cecilia's colleague suggested that neither the *advocative* nor *bureaucrat* justification is entirely convincing. Instead, he implied that there may be another kind of justification for dialogue experts' use of power.

> I see that this 'we are loyal to the politics' idea is necessary and that this activism where we say 'we must resolve this' is necessary. But we also need something else: a third way. Then, we need a discussion about what it means to be a civil servant. Where do our loyalties lie? I think more and more about my duty to the citizens and if it is such that I need to push through the things that the citizens want – not because I think it is right – and to get the politicians to give me a different mandate. That is where I need to develop something.

Concluding discussion: the difficulty of justifying use of power in dialogue practice

We have inquired into how Swedish dialogue experts make sense of power relations with citizens. By engaging in joint inquiry with a group of Swedish dialogue experts, we demonstrated how it is possible to move beyond the somewhat locked-in situation where researchers either critique dialogue practices from outside or support them by advocating for consensual and egalitarian ideals. Instead, by employing recent thinking about power and justification (Forst, 2017; Haugaard, 2018), we engaged critically with the practices of the emerging group of dialogue experts, who so far have operated largely under the radar of Swedish urban studies.

The findings confirm how these street-level workers of democracy are confronted with the dilemma of "following from the front" (Moore, 2012). Our study sheds new light on this dilemma by conceptualising it in terms of power and justification. The dialogue experts are most comfortable when critiquing their own and others' use of power. Over the three focus groups, they critically scrutinised how civil servants – themselves included – tend to shape dialogues with citizens and thereby constrain the possibility of citizens participating on equal terms. They identified how the established power relations in urban governance led to exclusion of certain groups of citizens, and they explained how they would like to change that. Through reflexive conversations over the three workshops, the practitioners concluded that they should take a step back and soften their (2D) agenda setting power in order to empower citizens. They want to be at *ögonhöjd* (eye-level) with the citizens, and, rather than leading, they want to be "led by the citizens". Thus, they emphasise the importance of *following* rather than being *in front*.

In contrast, the dialogue experts find it more difficult to explain when they are entitled to lead, i.e., when their use of *power over* might be justified. Prompted by the researchers' challenging questions about legitimacy, they discussed if they might employ an *advocative* justification to provide motivation for their efforts to make the planning processes

more inclusive. According to the *advocative* justification, dialogue experts should be change makers with agency and a somewhat independent agenda from the dominating regime (on advocacy planners see Davidoff, 1965; Sager, 2016). Even if the *advocative* justification made sense to the practitioners, they landed on embracing the more conventional *bureaucratic* justification of merely implementing the will of elected politicians who have mandated the practitioners to innovate dialogue practices. In spite of this attempt to return to the safe haven of the value-neutral ideal of bureaucracy, the practitioners' dilemma could not be resolved, and the ambivalence remained. They still found it difficult to justify their use of power. Hence, the workshop series ended on the assertion that they "need to have a discussion about what it means to be a civil servant."

The findings show that the essence of the dialogue experts' dilemma, expressed in terms of power, is to critique the use of power, while being *in* a position of power, in order to make the case for more inclusive urban governance processes. Even so, dialogue experts cannot merely critique power. To be effective and to justify their practice in the eyes of citizens, politicians and other governance practitioners, they must be able to explain, in a socially acceptable way, why they are entitled to use *power over* to influence the process and outcome of participation (Westin, 2019). This task is daunting for professional experts in a practice informed by consensual and egalitarian ideals (see Allmendinger, 2009, p. 220–221). The dialogue experts' power dilemma arises when they navigate the tension between two equally important values in urban governance: the equality principle embedded in citizenship and the principle of inequality inherent to expertise (see Moore, 2017; Warren, 1996). Just as they cannot do away with the equality of democracy, they cannot do away with expertise as the basis for their positions of power in urban governance.

This study, as with all studies, has its limitations. While the empirical focus on narratives and the focus-group method make it possible to study dialogue experts' sense-making, this approach does not provide opportunities for studying the practitioners' actions in practice. Additionally, even if the choice of focusing on conceptualising the dilemma of "following from the front" through the concepts of power and justification provides interesting findings, it limits the possibilities of shedding light on other kinds of dilemmas and tensions in dialogue practice.

In spite of these limitations, we have arguably demonstrated how recent thinking about the links between power and justification may shed light on a core dilemma in dialogue practice. Our findings point towards the need for conducting further research into the justification of dialogue experts' use of power in urban governance. Such research might include three tasks: (1) to further explore how subcategories of dialogue experts justify their actions in different contexts, (2) to observe what kind of actions taken by dialogue experts are found to be socially acceptable by citizens, politicians and other governance actors and (3) to explore how previous theoretical work related to justification and power might help in understanding dialogue practice (see Campbell, 2012; Connelly et al., 2006; Fainstein, 2014; Puustinen, Mäntysalo & Jarenko, 2017).

For the broader discussions about dialogues within urban governance, our study shows how a critically engaged research approach adds value (Joosse et al., 2020). We have taken the long-standing critique regarding the alleged power-blindness of participatory practices as a prompt for engaging in inquiry with a group of Swedish dialogue experts. In so doing, we have not merely critiqued the shortcomings of dialogue practice from the outside, but instead, in some modest way, contributed to renewing the practice from within. Our findings provide an understanding of the problem of power from the perspective of dialogue practitioners: it is not that the practitioners are "power-blind" but rather that they are faced

with the dilemma of justifying their use of power within a practice whose core aim is to critique power.

About the article:

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