

GOVERNANCE FROM THE GROUND UP: REDISCOVERING MARY PARKER FOLLETT

MARIA VERONICA ELIAS

Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne

ABSTRACT

Democracy is often touted as the normative dimension of public administration. However, what “governance from the ground up” is and how it actually works have been relatively neglected by the field. This research utilizes a phenomenological line of inquiry that explores whether Mary Parker Follett’s community process theory (1918/1923) has any salience in actual collaborative experiences at the neighborhood level. Using an approach of “practice illuminating theory” (Hummel, 1998), this study explores how concrete collaborative practices may contribute to theories of deliberative democracy. The research shows that Follett’s community process—far from being an abstraction or utopian—accurately describes an everyday practice in neighborhood group dynamics, and furthermore makes sense of the political community or *polis* that the ancient Greeks praised as genuine democratic governance.

INTRODUCTION

What are the necessary conditions for the practice of deliberative democracy and active citizenship? Hannah Arendt (1958) would answer from an ontological viewpoint that when people get together in deliberation, the public space is created; that is, it is constituted through the collective process. Democracy in the most meaningful sense, one the Athenians would understand, is the creation and use of the public space for deliberation (Arendt, 1958). People can collaborate and come to learn and work together through political dialogue (Hummel & Stivers, 1998), or what Mary Parker Follett called “community process” (1918/1923, 1919).

This article calls attention to the importance of Follett, the largely overlooked democratic theorist, to make

a case for what she called the community process in neighborhoods as the embodiment of governance from the ground up. Follett's study of actual communities is important because deliberative democracy theory too readily ignores the phenomenological knowledge of people. Neighborhood groups that get together to deliberate and find solutions to shared problems know first-hand what it takes to engage in joint practices to solve common problems. In this framework, people give sense to an important but ignored dimension in the study of deliberative democracy: the inherent dynamics of the *polis* as expressed by those who experience them.

This article argues that people's experiences may enrich the theoretical dialogue on democratic governance by means of their stories. In this sense, this article refers to neighbors' stories in the very same manner that Ralph Hummel (1991) speaks of the importance and value of managers' stories to understand and make sense of situations in the Administrative State¹. In essence, what citizens know is especially important to understanding deliberative democracy, because they are the ones who actually and concretely embody participative practices.

The purpose of this article, then, is to better understand deliberative democracy and participatory practice by utilizing Follett's concepts to interpret empirical experience in a particular neighborhood. Using a phenomenological approach, the study on which this article is based (Elias, 2008) explores what Follett can teach us about deliberative democracy, and how a case study may illustrate the applicability of her theory. This article inquires whether Follett's "group process" might shed light on the dialogue and practice of genuine governance from the ground up in today's Administrative State.

FOLLETT'S COMMUNITY PROCESS

Mary Parker Follett (1918/1923, 1919) stands out as a twentieth century pioneer who transformed people's actual experiences in neighborhoods (in the context of overcrowded and unprepared urban America of the turn of the century) into the center of her theory of community process. Follett's "process" theory is crucial to understand the dynamic nature of democracy, understood in her framework as governance from the ground up. Process theory is relevant because writers today, as in the Progressive era, tend to emphasize the outcome of a process, in static, immutable terms (Taylor, 1967; Barnard, 1968; Putman, 1995), whereas Follett shifted the emphasis to the process itself and its more dynamic changing aspects. Although Follett has been criticized informally if not formally for the apparent naiveté or idealism of the language she uses to construct her community process theory, it is important to keep in mind that this theory stems from her direct experiences with the phenomena during her time as a social worker. In other words, this community process theory evolved from the very people enacting it. Neighborhood groups were for Follett (1918/1923) the battleground for the creation and recreation of the political experience as people gathered within a common place and tried to find solutions to shared problems. Based on these experiences, Follett (1918/1923) asserted direct participatory democracy would drive the citizenry to create a real, palpable—a "living"—politics (p. 243), clearly paralleling the ancient Greeks' meaning of "politics"².

Governance from the ground up, in Follett's (1918/1923) sense, refers to the integration of people's ideas at the neighborhood level through frequent deliberation and group practices. The "constitutiveness" of group process would hence emerge through people's creative energy of deliberation and politics. Grassroots

governance is created through an always changing and dynamic group process that entails “constructive conflict” and “integration” (Follett, 1925a, pp. 30, 32-49), “circular behavior,” and “the law of the situation” (1925b, pp. 54, 58-64).

In order to palliate the inherent problems created by representative government in a federal system³, Follett (1918/1923) suggested the embodiment of self-governance by means of the neighbors’ collective practices. These practices would eventually translate into concrete changes to the neighborhoods’ quality of services and amenities. Participatory process could then more “efficiently” and pragmatically help resolve shared problems in urban America. She argued that these much needed changes were possible by engaging the citizenry in the task of forging the “consciousness of oneness” or “group consciousness” (1918/1923, pp. 53, 59, 70). A shared *becoming* would be plausible by means of continuous deliberation and the creation of group knowledge or the “common will” (1918/1923, p. 51). In community processes—structured as dynamism and change—people learn *together* to take responsibility for the fate of a shared place.

The conformation of neighborhood groups as the initial cells for genuine collective process embodies governance from the ground up. As pointed out earlier, Follett’s aspirational language should not be confused with her very concrete and real experiences in inner cities of urban America of the turn of the century.

Follett’s democratic citizenship refers to the knowledge collectively constituted through the groups’ political experience of deliberation. Group knowledge is forged in the process of integrating ideas—a process that comes about through intense and enriching group deliberation. Thus, *process* becomes central in the neighbors’ deliberative practices as they can only evolve a shared consciousness and vision over time. The “outcome”

approach does not account for the neighborhood aspirations and struggles; that is, it neglects people's aspirations of collective struggling, with each others' limitations, to build a common vision. Furthermore, Follett's (1918/1923) group process is made richer by her concepts of creative experience, unifying activity, the common good as the group's *leitmotif*, practical politics, and neighborliness. These characteristics constitute the core meanings encompassed in this article's examination of Follett's idea of governance from the ground up. To clarify, each will be defined in brief.

Shared thinking and doing is a creative experience in so far as people's deliberative practices grow into something new that is collectively created and richer than the mere addition of people's individual viewpoints. Community is for Follett a *creative* process because it emerges from the intrinsic dynamic that integrates differences among people into a larger and more encompassing whole: the "group idea." Integration is thus the subtle process of interweaving the multiple ideas of the group members into a richer alternative or solution. New shared understandings are collectively created through a creative experience of deliberation (Follett, 1918/1923, p. 24). Follett (1924, 1925a, 1925b) argued about "conflict" from the process theory stance, making clear that (1) conflict is natural among human beings and can be dealt with constructively; and (2) integration and constructive conflict are possible, not inevitable or all there is in life. Moreover, and as Follett (1925a) put it, "I don't say there is no tragedy in life" (p. 36). In fact, she argued that sometimes the effort to integrate does not work.

Community process is a unifying activity in that it is a continuous *recreating* of the group idea through a process of synthesis. Follett reminds us that we become human beings through the constant interacting with others, not by "hiding" from others. In other words, we become

more empowered, “stronger” people, when we join others in shared practices rather than by isolating ourselves in individualistic endeavors and practices:

The [. . .] self-and-others fallacy has transformed the idea of self-interest. Our interests are inextricably interwoven. The question is not what is best for me or for you, but for all of us. My interests are not less important to the world than yours and vice versa. The self-and-others fallacy has led directly to a conception which has wrought much harm among us, namely, the identification of “others” with “society” which leads the self outside society and brings us to one of the most harmful individualisms. (Follett, 1918/1923, p. 82)

The unifying activity of group process is closely connected with creative thinking and hence parallels synthesis: “We cannot transcend self by means of others, but only through the synthesis of the self and others” (Follett, 1918/1923, p. 83). In short, the essence of grassroots democracy requires active participation, which Follett strengthens with her concept of “unifying activity.”

The group’s *leitmotif* is the pursuit of the *common good*, which refers to shared goals driving collective deliberation and action. To make the actual group association—the *practice* of community—happen, “the larger interest must be made personal before it can be made real” (Follett, 1918/1923, p. 33). People come together to create a common and genuine idea, which no one can achieve by him or herself alone, and which can only happen through joint deliberative practices.

Practical politics is the fountain of freedom because the person discovers his/her true nature, gains his/her true freedom only through the group, or by means of practical politics (Arendt, 2005)⁴. In this sense, Follett argues that:

The *laissez-aller* [unrestrained freedom] which people allow themselves when alone disappears when they meet. . . We feel it there, an impalpable, substantial thing in our midst. It raises us to the nth power of action, it fires our minds and glows in our hearts and fulfills and actuates itself no less, but rather on this very account, because it has been generated only by our being together. (Follett, 1918/1923, p. 32)

In other words, Follett argues that politics—in the original ancient Greek sense—cannot exist in concert with rugged individualism.

Neighborliness is inhabitation—so far as shared practices in neighborhoods bring people together through a shared place. Neighborliness translates into a shared consciousness, shared concerns, and a shared vision (Kemmis, 1990). At the same time, the place—as Arendt’s (1958) table metaphor—prevents people from falling over each other and subsuming their individual identities into a mob or an amorphous mass.

These concepts of creative experience, unifying activity, the common good, practical politics, and neighborliness comprise Follett’s community process. In this community process, Follett’s vision of governance from the ground up becomes a most useful guide to understand democracy as a dynamic process that seeks to improve shared conditions at the local level. Follett’s theory profoundly challenges the academic dialogue and the practice of government that sees the citizens as “customers” or “clients” of the state. Most importantly, it challenges the Administrative State’s often inadequate efforts to directly engage citizens in governance and/or facilitate self-governance. The following case study based on neighbors’ stories seeks to elucidate whether Follett’s community process theory has any salience in

contemporary neighborhood groups, and whether it can shed any light on the ongoing dialogue about deliberative democracy and participatory practice.

THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF COMMUNITY PROCESS

This article further explores the findings of a dissertation inquiry (Elias, 2008). Given the field of public administration's emphasis on democracy, but its tendency to leave it loosely defined or undefined, we need to clarify our particular meaning. This article discusses deliberative democracy and the participatory practices used in its implementation. Specifically, what can deliberative democracy theory learn from everyday neighborhood groups' practices? Does Follett's (1918/1923, 1919) theory of "community as a process" happen in real life? In other words, what can be said from a comparison of people's experiences of neighborhood group practices—as they relate them—about Follett's community process? Phenomenology is a good methodological fit to answer these questions. It directly asks the sources of the social phenomenon—that is, people themselves—about their own experiences, and can yield answers that are reflections of social reality.

In this case, neighbors themselves were asked to describe and make sense of their community experiences to yield a greater understanding of governance from the ground up. Story-telling through face-to-face interviews was selected as the method that could most appropriately capture the essence of people's experiences from their own subjective perspectives. The people interviewed were active, long-term, members of neighborhood improvement groups in a neighborhood of Akron, Ohio. Those associations were first created by the neighbors themselves as a response to particular issues striking the neighborhood

and its inhabitants, such as economic development, safety, historical preservation, housing development, arts and recreation, planning and zoning, cleaning and trash pick-up, and the needs of children, the elderly, and others. The neighborhood groups were selected following a snowballing technique⁵ using the criterion that the groups' main aim was to engage in joint efforts to improve some aspect of their neighborhood. A second criterion was ontological: that the neighborhood could be a great test of the utility of Follett's theory to define what it means to be in community.

The qualities of the Highland Square neighborhood of West Akron made it a good test of Follett's community process due to the diversity and difference among its neighbors. The diversity can be seen in the neighborhood's salient heterogeneous character—compared with other neighborhoods of Akron—from its architecture to the people's diverse occupations and hobbies. A historical and dense urban area of west Akron, the Highland Square arises as a distinct artistic spot of eclectic buildings and interests. It houses a neighborhood-grown theater, local restaurants, coffee shops, neighborhood associations, arts and holiday festivals, among other attractions. Another salient characteristic of the neighborhood was its overwhelmingly residential-business neighborhood dynamic. The Highland Square neighborhood is characterized by its bohemian population which boomed in the mid-1950s industrial Akron. The neighbors have a wide range of socioeconomic, educational and religious backgrounds, as well as ethnical origins. What they all have in common, though, is their shared sense of care for the place, enrichment by the arts and social events, and the responsibility for the well-being of its people.

At the first level of interpretation, the narratives elicited in the interview process were recorded; each was carefully listened to at least twice, and the meaning of each

(as conceived by the investigator) was reported. The purpose of this qualitative interpretation was to understand people's ideas through major themes that emerged in the story-telling process. People's stories can reveal the different "truths" which are unmistakably omnipresent in life, that is, life seen through diverse lenses and from different viewpoints. People's stories of their experiences in group deliberation and practical politics constitute the multiple realities that form the *polis*. Without those, as Hannah Arendt (1958) suggested, no life would make sense. The terms and meanings of concepts were left up to the participants themselves who live the phenomena at hand, and thus are able to judge pertinently the relevance of the concepts in connection with their experiences.

At the second level of the interpretation process of people's stories, the implications of the respondents' statements in regard to Follett's theory of politics were explicated. The stories both illustrate and extend Follett's theory of community process. Through both, this interpretation aims to enlighten the dialogue on deliberative democracy in today's Administrative State.

NEIGHBORHOOD GROUPS: COMMUNITY PROCESS IN PRACTICE

A number of themes emerged from the story telling process that characterizes neighborhood associations in a dynamic and rich manner. By bringing together the neighbors' ideas and Follett's characterization of community, this section seeks to illuminate theory through people's experiences of deliberative democracy and participative practice. The doubled emphasis (in *italics* and/or **bold**) within some quotes in this article, aim to draw the reader's attention in two different ways. First, the *italicized words/phrases* convey the emphases that the neighbors themselves allocated to their storytelling as they

narrated their experiences. Second, with **the bold emphasis on words/phrases**, the author seeks to emphasize some sections (or the entirety) of the emerging themes as she interpreted people's narratives, utilizing people's own terms.

Creative Thinking: A Process of Integration

Woven through the interview narratives was a recurring theme of the creative aspect of community process. For instance, a neighbor talks of her experience of having an idea that was transformed and enriched into a "group idea," which in turn translated into a group action:

So Jennifer had this idea; she expressed it either here or over across the street where we had the holiday festival, and people *came together* to help others in their community. So it's having a sense of place that draws people together, to have a way of communicating. . . So I think if we have this Main Street program, that would tie the whole neighborhood together. (Juliet, Pagoda member)⁶

The co-creating of social life through the improvement of different aspects of the neighborhood is also illustrated in this story: "Seeing people come together and watch out for crime being solved effectively, and having something effective happen, has been the best experience" (Gary, Miraflores member). In Gary's story, we can see the element of surprise connoted by the superlative he uses ("the best experience"), which reflects the pleasure of accomplishing with others what would have otherwise seemed impossible. Moreover, this co-creation, this bringing something new into being with the group, meant a unique experience for the neighbor, who could not

believe that a shared project actually worked out. Likewise, another neighbor reflects:

The plan is to have a couple of streets take care of themselves, like Campinha⁷. This is the model of what we would want to see in other parts of the neighborhoods...when you have groups like Campinha who make events for their street and the whole neighborhood... **We need more streets that take ownership of their little corner of the neighborhood and work for its improvements.** Miraflores⁸ should be the umbrella for all the other little groups. (George, Miraflores member; emphasis added)

Here, George shows how an initial group idea evolved into fruitful neighborhood practice that sought to resolve common problems, and which developed into a shared ownership of the place. It also points to the plausibility that joint practices can be further expanded to other areas involving different neighborhood associations. This expansion of group practices would also allow neighborhood improvement organizations to become the local cells capable of exercising self-governance.

As the neighbors' stories illustrated, a new and richer idea emerges in a permanent process of interplay with others, which constitute the groups' "warp and weft." That is, the process of building competencies⁹ together becomes more complex and intertwined as people meet and discuss the ideas further and anew. In that context, one's sense of wholeness is necessarily tied to the group dynamics. The group engendered by these activities has the potential outcome of achieving greater neighborhood participation in local governance.

As it can be seen in the neighbors' stories, creative thinking in neighborhood associations can be synthesized

in the process of integration, the inherent dynamic force that allows for collective growth and mutual learning. In the same line of thought, Follett argued that “the members of a group are reciprocally conditioning forces none of which acts as it would act if any one member were different or absent” (Follett, 1918/1923, p. 31). For Follett, creative thinking is the driving force of community process as it brings people’s single ideas together into a richer whole through deliberative exchanges, whereby the group idea will inescapably be more encompassing than any individual’s idea alone.

Unifying Activity: Dynamism and Change

The process of governance from the ground up brings people’s energies together to create a new unity of purpose. The following neighbor’s story captures this idea:

I realized that we have a great array of people in the neighborhood, and I realized how rich we are. We have senior citizens who are architects or were in the war. Or from people who have kids, you learn what other people’s needs are. As a group we need to do something about it. **So being involved in the group has really opened my eyes to what the various issues are in the different constituencies.** And it has made me very passionate about the neighborhood, I really love this neighborhood, I love this area. If someone would contact me and say, “I live in this area and I need help with such and such,” I would do anything I could to help them get in touch with whoever they need to. **Being involved in the neighborhood has made me a stronger advocate for the area and for the people living in it.** (Laura, Campinha member; emphasis added)

Here, Laura is noting that by being an active part of the neighborhood association, she was able to better relate to the problems and concerns of the large populace living in her neighborhood; she was able to see the struggles common with her neighbors. The neighborhood group dynamics also helped Laura appreciate the potential intrinsic in the diverse knowledge of rich backgrounds and expertise that could benefit the neighborhood. Finally, this story points to the importance of understanding where in life each neighbor is coming from, to be able to grasp people's different realities, concerns and hopes, and relate to them. Another neighbor conveys that meaning, as follows: "At the tree lighting in the Legion, I was *amazed* to see how other people have it worse than me, even though I'm unemployed" (Jennifer, Pagoda member).

Mary Parker Follett (1918/1923, 1919) spoke of a "unifying activity" of the group to signify dynamism paralleling the constant change of life itself. She argued that the flow of lived experience does not abandon itself, but rather evolves into "the new flow" of lived experience endlessly (1919, p. 582). As can be seen in the participants' stories, the joint learning process prompts the participants to learn together generating a new, shared, knowledge.

Practical Politics: From "Power-With" to "Power-To"

The neighbors interviewed argued that the crucial elements to re-create community process are the very differences that exist among the group members, such as different personalities and diverse ideas. In these examples from the neighbors, we can see how people work through the tensions and struggles concomitant with deliberative democracy. Nick's story reflects the importance of difference for a fruitful group dynamic when dealing with neighborhood issues:

There is *no* one leader; there is a kind of commune-like arrangement or community where everybody accepts a good amount of responsibility of what happens. **So it doesn't matter who is chairing the meeting; what matters is what everyone brings to the table. I don't know if we would be successful if there was only one leader; we *are* successful because there is *not* just one leader.** We have 40 to 50 very different personalities that happen to live in the same area. (Nick, Campinha member; emphasis added)

Practical politics capitalizes on differences among people in constructive ways through deliberation—in the creating of the public space, of community process (Follett, 1918/1923, 1919; Arendt, 1958). The neighbors' narratives can be interpreted as an expansion of Follett's "power-with" to a more encompassing "power-to," or a power collectively created from within the group process. In this sense, and as the story above suggests, the moment that a group is strongly or univocally headed, the richness of the diversity fades away.

Likewise, Juliet adds: "Community is what a good family should be: You don't always think alike but you always care about each other" (Juliet, Pagoda member). In this sense, politics is clearly the finding of common ground amidst difference. It does not mean that people agree all the time, or that even discussions happen in an orderly fashion.

Shared responsibility in group dynamics is a concern for the neighbors as they believe that all people ought to participate in the happenings and the fate of the place that they share. In fact, a neighbor argues that rather than waiting for the government to solve issues, the neighbors should recognize that *they* are the city, *they* make the town, and in interacting with others *they* constitute and reconstitute—they embody—the political power:

It's a little frustrating because many people think that the city is *some* entity that has unlimited wealth and that is there to clean up after you. And each of us make up the city, so it's not like the city is somebody else that is going to come and clean the street signs and scrape the sidewalks. It is your street, you know? You pay the taxes to get the streets repaired and the lights up, so I think that **you really have to take ownership**. When doing part of this with the neighborhood, I feel like it is very important to me what happens because I really feel connected with the ownership. **You feel a strong sense of ownership because you know that most things that are going to get done is because the group is going to do it, otherwise it won't get done.** (Jerry, Campinha member; emphasis added)

Shared responsibility in the neighbors' eyes relates to a shared power, collectively created from within the group, rather than superimposed from outside or above. Like the neighbors, Follett argued that individual responsibility is crucial for the group to create a richer process that builds upon differences, and whereby each person contributes with something useful to the shared purpose and larger aims:

No member of a group which is to create can be passive. All must be active and constructively active. It is not, however, to be constructively active merely to add a share: it must be a share which is related to and bound up with every other share. And it must be given in a way that it fits in with what others are giving. (Follett, 1918/1923, p. 28)

Likewise, the neighbors' opposition to the widely used "power over," along with their capability to stick

together through hardships to achieve shared goals, created a more encompassing type of power—“power-to”—that emerges in the unifying process of the group. In that sense the neighbors expand Follett’s idea of “power-with” to “power-to.” The following story illustrates this point:

The best [experience we had] was a couple of months ago with a landlord, a very hard and controversial issue, all the way up to the city council. They could rule in our favor or against us. The issue was the number of tenants he had in his property. He had six and we wanted him to bring his unit down to two families, just like the zoning code says. If you let him have six, then everyone else will have six and then you have the crime problem. . . . So four or five of our neighbors stood up and spoke, and literally because of what *they* said, they changed the councilmen’s minds. And they voted and voted in our favor! That was very big. That was a success story. The citizens stood up, and the council listened to us. That was very big. The worst issue was in the beginning, when our councilman didn’t know who we were before he had gotten our city district. Nobody would listen; they didn’t want to listen to us. We went about it in another way; we did it on our own. We went to Columbus, raised the money, put in the application and we got the grant. Once we got it, now they [city councilmen] felt different, and now they were with us. . . . It’s basic human nature. So it’s a tricky business; it’s listening and knowing exactly what you want and a constant dialogue, communicating what you want, even when you are on the same side of an issue. (Amelia, Miraflores member)

Amelia's story recounted that the members of the neighborhood group Miraflores pushed a zoning issue for many years before the City Council successfully passed it. This story also teaches us other lessons. Compromise is not a choice when a difficult and controversial decision is to be made between two or more groups (in this case the neighborhood association and the city council). What a successful process thus required was Follett's "integration" rather than "compromise" ("compromising would have resulted in a bad precedent," Laura, Campinha).

The success of this story emerges from the neighbors' long standing deliberative tradition and commitment with the zoning issue pointed out above, in Amelia's story, along with the city council members' willingness to begin "to hear" what the neighbors had to say in their own terms. Noteworthy is the neighbors' reflection on the controversial nature of civic engagement through their own experiences of deliberating on conflicting issues and contested values ("the citizens stood up and councilmen listened," Amelia, Miraflores). This story illustrates the importance of the group "sticking together" for what the neighborhood group had to say, and in the process, the collective created the power-to. This victory, in which the neighbors managed differences with public officials by "fighting them out" until they found common ground, poses a great example of community process in Follett's sense, and offers food for thought regarding what deliberative democracy and joint participative action can achieve.

Neighborliness: Shared Construction of the Polis

Neighborliness is not simply a shared place, but rather, it transcends into a collectively constructed process, a shared reality and vision; a shared beingness. The

following story illustrates the idea of neighborliness as a shared place and a shared reality collectively constructed:

Community is where people work together; take pride in where they live and in their neighbors, work toward pulling people together rather than dividing people. **To have central accord is an important part of community, where people know they can find their friends; to have a place where people can express themselves; a place where if a neighbor is in need other neighbors might find out about it.** There is a person that comes in here, her name is Jennifer. She is not working right now but she waited until her check came in at Christmas time in order to help a family that came to the neighborhood festival without proper clothing, and had babies and they didn't have all the things they needed to exist. And Jennifer *saw* that and she was spending her own money to help them. And so I thought "gosh, if Jennifer is doing this...", so I gave her some money, and then Mike gave her some money, and Becky then gave her some money, and someone else gave her a dollar, and so forth. So Jennifer had this idea, she expressed it either here or over across the street where we had the holiday festival, and **people came together to help others** in their community. (Juliet, Pagoda member; emphasis added)

In Juliet's words can be heard the echo of Follett's thoughts and ideas, as the neighbor points out that the place is constructed *with* others in the coming together of all. It is driven by the sense of care for others, and the need to help and protect those who are suffering hardships. In this sense the neighborhood becomes the basic unit of deliberation

and group process because it is where people learn to become a constituting part of a greater endeavor.

As the neighbors' stories reflect, Follett's principle of group process is most fruitfully carried out in neighborhoods because their inhabitants share needs, goals, and concerns. Since lives are lived at the neighborhood level, people have the possibility to organize themselves and enhance the provision of public services to the levels that they deem important. The neighbors are best equipped to pursue a constructive and useful deliberation process because they are most fully acquainted with, and aware of, the flaws and advantages of the area they inhabit, and they possess the most accurate, first-hand, information needed to mobilize change.

Follett's (1918/1923) idea of the physical closeness that only a neighborhood allows its inhabitants is crucial to the transformation of the Administrative State and reconstruction of "The New State" from the ground up. She recognized that people in neighborhoods know most profoundly and vividly the shared needs and concerns because they are in daily communication with each other as they share a place. To that effect, Follett argued:

Our proposal is that people should organize themselves into neighborhood groups to express their daily life, to bring to the surface the needs, desires and aspirations of that life, that these needs should become the substance of politics, and that these neighborhood groups should become the recognized political unit. (Follett, 1918/1923, p. 192)

The neighbors reflected on how the group allows its members to value the neighborhood as a meaningful place to live, and themselves as people driven by larger and common goals that transcend their single individualities. In

this sense, the group members illuminate Follett's thinking as follows:

By being involved in the group I actually feel that I really belong to it more than I ever had. . . I feel *more* part of the neighborhood being part of the group. I feel that I have more to offer now that I am involved. I can bring out other people in the neighborhood and get them more involved. It is nice to have more diversity. (Jennifer, Pagoda member)

The neighbors made clear in their stories that the importance of the "place" resides in that since people care about a space they inhabit and share, issues such as safety, health, and education become crucial concerns for daily deliberation and action in light of their shared wishes and purposes (Follett, 1918/1923; Arendt, 1958; Kemmis, 1990). Likewise, Follett argued:

The only place in the world where we can change ourselves is on the level where we are real. My neighbors may not think much of me because I paint pictures, knowing that my backyard is dirty, but my artist friends who like my color do not know or care about my backyard. (Follett, 1918/1923, p. 199)

The collective creation of the public space through deliberation constitutes the ancient Greeks' polis or political community. Since sharing a place, a neighborhood, also means sharing goals and aspirations for that place, the common good becomes central in the neighborhood group's vision.

The Common Good: A Learning in the Doing

People come together to create a common and genuine idea, which becomes the larger will. It is not that the collective solution is imposed, but rather, it is jointly created; constructively integrated à la Follett. It may not be a complete consensus but the solution will be one with which all can agree. Note how the group works together to improve their neighborhood, enhance what they like about it, and resolve unwanted situations:

A group of us got together because we cared about our neighborhood; we loved living in the neighborhood; and we had common concerns. **We decided to form this group so that we could work together to enhance what we liked about it and to better the things we thought that were problems.** The reason we did that is that we got tired of just sort of sitting there and expecting the police, the city and everyone expecting them to solve problems. . . We were worried about crime; we wanted to improve the values of our homes; and we wanted to protect what was there. (Amelia, Miraflores member; emphasis added)

In governance from the ground up, people not only learn about the value of democracy as caring for others beyond the individual self, but also about the *process* of coming together as a group and joining in practices that endlessly re-create the common will. Therefore, “learning in the doing” appears in people’s stories as the core value of working with others toward accomplishing the larger good for the neighborhood:

A few of us felt that we could not wait for the city to do everything. So some of us decided that we

would break up into little committees to clean up things, and we decided that no one should have to do that by themselves. So we formed the beautification committee that I was part of. I just wanted to participate. I don't want to have someone else do what happens at our street. It is important to help out. (Jerry, Campinha member)

Jerry here has discovered that joining others in shared works led to greater improvements in the neighborhood than what he would have achieved by himself alone. Learning in the doing is palpable in that as a new working committee was created to keep up the area, the group learned to take responsibility and ownership for the neighborhood. Together the neighbors created the common good.

To make the actual group association—the practice of community—real, each member must truly uphold the group's larger, shared, goal as the desired value and practice. Follett (1918/1923) made a case for the larger will to be collectively created as the underlying value that must exist for the group process to be a genuinely collective endeavor.

Freedom: Discovering Life In/ Through "Group Process"

One of the highest values of the group process is reaching freedom and finding life through the group. The following story illustrates the achievement of freedom through the group as a process born within the group, utterly related to "others," to the interrelations with the whole:

[Being part of the neighborhood group] is probably one of the most rewarding things that I did in my whole life. Learning that you can take up on an idea

and make it happen, even when everybody is looking at you and saying “you want to do what?” and just being persistent and saying “yeah,” and enlisting people and getting them engaged in the idea. Those are skills that translate anywhere. And it was probably my first experience as an adult, because I was in my mid-20s then. You know, really having that kind of a success. What was really cool is that it didn’t really get attributed to me, at least for the first couple of years. It was like everybody showed up, did their part, had a really good time, and sat back afterwards and said “Wasn’t that fun?! Let’s do it again!” And that—in as small scale—is what makes the neighborhood work: It is people doing their work and saying “It worked, that was fun; let’s do it again.” (Mary, Pagoda member)

Note Mary’s reflection that the group wanted to “do it again” because, as Follett (1918/1923) noted, in joining with others, we discover the larger will; we find true freedom (Arendt, 2005).

Hannah Arendt (2005) argued in a very similar manner as Follett. Arendt argued that the only means to achieve true freedom is through politics. For politics exists in the interacting *with* others, in the *in-betweens* that arise among people when they meet and argue. It is only in practical politics, thus far understood, that people gain true freedom: “Freedom exists only in the unique intermediary space of politics” (Arendt, 2005, p. 95); in other words, “the meaning of politics is freedom” (2005, p.108).

Freedom of the individual self *through* the group also is clear in Follett’s process theory of community. In fact, she emphasizes that the ultimate gain of working with others is discovering what would be impossible by oneself alone: that we are constituted by others. “My freedom is

my share in creating, my part in the creative responsibility. Those who are free are the ones who *win* their freedom through fellowship” (Follett, 1918/1923, p. 72). The great discovery that we are *being* constituted by interacting with others—as the whole—liberates us from mere individualistic aims, and we find life through the interweaving of ideas, through deliberative practices. Follett succinctly (and powerfully) reflected:

The true nature of every man is found only in the whole. A man is ideally free only so far as he is interpermeated by every other human being; he gains his freedom through a perfect and complete relationship because thereby he achieves his whole nature. By joining with others we find liberty and increase all our capacity for life through the interweaving of willings. (Follett, 1918/1923, p. 69)

Interpersonal Benefits: Follett’s “Pungent Sense of Effective Reality”

Caring for others pulls people together in joint practices to help the neighbors in need. In such process, as the neighbors came to see and value, common bonds emerge as the essential pieces for the constitutiveness of the group process. The following narrative shows that developing relationships among neighbors is as important (if not more) than simply keeping the neighborhood in good shape and healthful:

We are not just concerned about the neighborhood but about the neighbors as well. I think there are different depths of layers of community. At the most basic it’s just a shared interest about our houses and making our neighborhood look nice, but

then it goes deeper than that, as you grow with the group. (Laura, Campinha member)

Shared struggles create shared bonds among group members, as well as a sense of common pride for what has been jointly brought to fruition. Taking pride on the group practices means to value one another in a genuine way. A case in point is this neighbor's story:

I would say the best thing [of working in my neighborhood group] has been doing chores with my neighbors, like—it may not sound so much fun—planting flowers, or I don't really enjoy scraping stickers out of signs, but **being together with your neighbors, and doing things together so that when you are done you feel proud, it makes you feel good.** And I think that's the best part of it. It is sharing the community feeling. I don't even think as them being neighbors but as being friends, that we are doing it because we care. (Jerry, Campinha member; emphasis added)

Another neighbor talks about the benefits of having joined the neighborhood organization: "I think that the neighborhood group has helped me keep connected to my neighborhood, and become drafted into participating. I do now more for my neighborhood than what I would have done otherwise" (Paul, Miraflores member).

Other interpersonal benefits appeared, as the discovery that life now makes sense; sharing activities and endeavors with other fellow neighbors, such as launching joint business enterprises, seeking to run for public office, working in the non-profit and voluntary sectors, and collaborating with different agencies, among other interpersonal projects. This neighbor reflects on his experience of discovering "nice" people in the area through

the neighborhood group, and wanting to spend time with them. He also points to the access to new information and opportunities that the neighborhood group facilitated to his members:

I'd say I have pretty good connections in the neighborhood, in terms of interactions with other people. It definitely increased them to another level. So it definitely makes you feel good about the neighborhood. It makes you aware about activities like the garden tour. I had never gone to a garden tour until I joined the group, I went on the garden tour last year and **I had a blast! So it's helped increase my involvement in my community in my daily life and it is helped my connections with other people that I *didn't* know before.** And the people who usually join these groups are nice people; people who you would want to know. So I am happy about that. . . So I think that there are **added benefits to it, also political opportunities.** I was on the city council years ago and if I ever decided to run for office, this is a strong political base, too. So for anybody who would want to jump into city leadership this would provide you with an incredible political base to achieve it! That means instant volunteers, and instant donations, and instant organizers. And there are members in the group who are tied to the arts, the art museum, and the ballet, so all these provide links into the neighborhood and broader community because you get to know of events that are going on around the area. (Paul, Miraflores member; emphasis added)

As this case study illuminates, freedom and liberty can be gained both at a personal level and as a group through daily activities that involve the fellow others.

Follett (1918/1923) urged us to consider the day to day, tangible advantages of being a part of neighborhood group process: “It makes possible the association of neighbors, which means fuller acquaintance and a more real understanding” (p. 192). Another benefit of community process for its members is, therefore, their evolving of mutual trust and confidence:

Mere acquaintance will lead inevitably to friendly feeling. We certainly do feel more kindly to the people we actually see (that is, “the pungent sense of effective reality”). Neighborhood organization will substitute confidence for suspicion—a great gain. (Follett, 1918/1923, p. 192)

Deliberation and collective practices instill a sense of caring for others, a shared reality and shared ownership of the place by the group’s evolving dynamics. Through the group process, the neighbors created a new reality, vital and effective, a consequence of their having made valued contributions. This new collectively created reality thus engendered a new beingness, pungent and alive, in which the individuals found new life and purpose as well.

BEYOND FOLLETT’S IDEAS

The seven concepts of Follett’s theory of community process are clearly illustrated by the neighbors’ stories described in the previous section. As can be seen, the language used to articulate people’s lived experiences is somewhat repetitive, which serves to illustrate how these concepts interweave with each other in reality. The new *group* idea that Follett (1918/1923) emphasized showed itself in the interviewees’ experiences as a continuous learning process. A creative experience was evolved in the

coming together and genuinely creating joint ideas toward changing unwanted neighborhood situations.

Follett's community process—conceived here as governance from the ground up—appeared as a lived reality in the inner-city neighborhoods studied, where association members sought to make concrete changes and improve the quality of life of the whole. The components essential to governance from the ground up appeared in people's joint efforts, their concerns for the place and others, and the development of hands-on expertise. A unifying activity thus emerged as the crucial constitutive piece of the deliberative process and the shared improvement practices.

This case study both confirms and goes beyond Follett's theory of community process. The neighbors asserted with their stories what Follett had said in her theory of community process, especially in the "coming together with others" through "creative thinking" to work around common problems, as well as in the notion of a shared place (the neighborhood) that the neighbors cared for. This parallels Follett's creative thinking and the integration of ideas that the deliberative process entails.

Moreover, the neighbors confirmed Follett's unifying activity as dynamism and change through people's abilities to adapt to always changing and conflicting situations, to integrate many and diverse desires into a solution or alternative that would be suitable to the group members. In fact, the groups were able to cope with uncertainty and with a different and changing membership over time, as well as with multiple struggles, which further strengthened their existing bonds.

The common good as the *leitmotif* of the group is another confirmation in practice of Follett's (1918/1923) larger purpose needed for joint practices to be made real. The neighbors pointed at their convictions to push forward common works, join in street clean-ups, as well as

neighborhood watches to prevent crime. The ultimate goal for the neighbors was, undoubtedly, the well being and healthfulness of the shared place and its people.

As discussed before, the neighbors' experiences seem to extend Follett's ideas in some ways. For instance, their stories can be interpreted as a deepening of the meaning of Follett's "power-with" to a type of shared reality, "power-to," that emerged *from within* the group in the dialogical process that belonged to all of them equally. Practical politics emerges, therefore, as a genuinely shared process that builds upon integration of ideas, and people's commitment to the well-being of the neighborhood and its people.

Other ideas that the neighbors' experiences bring to Follett's community process theory include the interpersonal benefits and other gains that the neighborhood improvement practices created. Some of those benefits, as they pointed out, were new friendships, caring for the neighborhood more than before, feeling an utter sense of "belonging" and of "caring for others."

"Freeing of the self through the group," as well as "discovering life through the group" were other salient ideas that the neighbors pointed out as their dearest. The finding of personal freedom through the group is probably one of the most meaningful discoveries of this phenomenological study. It points directly to the idea that practical politics—as deliberation based on differences—brings people together in the creating of a new and shared reality in which the person finds life's ultimate meaning *through* the group's activities (Follett, 1918/1923; Arendt, 1958, 2005).

The participants believed that both formal and informal interactions among groups and public officials strengthened their relationships with public officials and other agencies over time. In fact, the story of the zoning code ordinance showed that the neighbors stood up for

themselves, and were willing to listen to the officials, while the officials were also able to listen carefully to the neighbors. Discussing the issue over time allowed for a shared power among public officials and the neighbors in the decision making process. The neighbors also referred to these relations as important benefits to influence formal and informal decisions at the local level, when the participants had voice in the political “game” to get things done. This could be summarized in the neighbors’ success experience in getting the zoning issue passed in the neighborhood association’s favor. The deliberative process with the city officials allowed the neighbors to feel treated (for the first time) as valued citizens, and as key actors in resolving the zoning issue at hand, so personal to them.

The neighbors’ experiences both illustrate Follett’s theorizing and give life to an otherwise abstract conceptualization of community process. It allows for further thinking and dialogue that points to the potential of the neighborhood group process for the construction of an inclusive democratic governance processes. Follett urged us to rediscover the potential for change and improvement that community process could create at the local level.

Finally, the case study shows that deliberative democracy and participatory practice are plausible and desirable to resolve local problems at the level where people live and interact. The case presented here aims to be an example that promises to enhance governance from the ground up—civic engagement as “a learning in the doing”—and instate a more informed and effective governance process in the Administrative State.

CONCLUSIONS

Follett’s notion of a community as the process of integration of diverse ideas and people does provide a possible way to move beyond rugged individualism—as

documented in the abovementioned stories, and in other studies¹⁰. Governance from the ground up may be necessary if we are to deal effectively with immediate issues of the quality of life of citizens. However, this does require government qua public administration but in a very different manner than classical public management. Public administrators must be facilitators of community governance¹¹, ensuring that the process is fair and open as well as constructively integrative in Follett's terms. These are not inconsequential changes to how we do public administration. Nonetheless, they may be necessary if the field is serious about the practices of democratic governance—deliberative democracy and participatory practice.

The argument of this paper is not that the stories presented above can be found everywhere or that this scenario is inevitable; it simply argues that this case study shows what is possible when communities enact Follett's theory of democracy. This research sought to make a case that offers some "food for thought." The real life experiences illustrated in this case study show that people can be altruistic amidst differences, and are able to move forward the spirit and practices of the collective through joint practices. These stories show that, despite disagreements, the neighbors care for the place they share, which unites them in meaningful collaborative practices. This is practical politics, or the give-and-take that inevitably and desirably happens among people when they get together and deliberate about contested public issues.

This case showed that Follett's ideas could be a basis for understanding and practicing deliberative democracy in the Administrative State. Her theory of community process is useful to concretely solve problems from the ground up, where those problems are actually felt most concretely. It also is a powerful tool to bring together the different agencies and citizens towards more concerted

actions that reflect all the stakes in a problem (De Souza Briggs, 2008). Follett's community process does not require an established "collectivity" but rather a process created by the citizens of a shared space when they interact over public issues.

Understanding people's experiences from their own viewpoints could transform the daily work of public administrators into more collaborative and efficient practices (De Souza Briggs, 2008; Forester, 2009). Deliberating about problems and attempting to resolve them collectively would make public administration and management more relevant at the level where lives are lived, in cities.

Government can institutionalize some of the lessons that arise from the neighborhood groups' deliberative processes, improving administration by aligning it with a ground up democracy. In the public administrators' understanding of the intrinsic complexities of neighborhood self-governance practices lies the potential not only to uphold democratic values but also to emphasize and evolve a more participative democracy. In turn, the Administrative State would become more meaningful and "real" to the citizens involved in the creative experience of collaboration towards action, one that genuinely embodies governance from the ground up.

REFERENCES

- Arendt, H. (1958). *The human condition*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Arendt, H. (2005). *The promise of politics*. New York, NY: Schocken Books.

- Barnard, C. I. (1968). *The functions of the executive*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Originally published in 1938.
- De Souza Briggs, X. (2008). *Democracy as problem solving: Civic capacity in communities across the globe*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Ehrenreich, B. (2009, July 12). A homespun safety net. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com>
- Elias, M. V. (2008). *Community: An experience-based critique of the concept*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. The University of Akron, Ohio.
- Follett, M. P. (1919). Community is a process. *Philosophical Review*, 28, 576-588.
- Follett, M. P. (1918/1923). *The new state: Group organization the solution of popular government*. New York: Longmans, Green.
- Follett, M. P. (1924). *Creative experience*. New York, NY: Longmans, Green and Co.
- Follett, M. P. (1925a). Constructive conflict. In: Metcalf, H. C. & Urwick, L. (Eds.). (1941). *Dynamic administration; The collected papers of Mary Parker Follett*. pp. 30-49. New York, NY: Harper.
- Follett, M. P. (1925b). The giving of orders. In: Metcalf, H. C. & Urwick, L. (Eds.). (1941). *Dynamic administration; The collected papers of Mary Parker Follett*. pp. 50-70. New York, NY: Harper.
- Forester, J. (1981). Questioning and organizing attention: Toward a critical theory of planning and administrative practice. *Administration and Society*, 13, 161-205.

- Forester, J. (2009). *Dealing with differences. Dramas of mediating public disputes*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hummel, R. P. (1991). Stories managers tell: Why they are as valid as science. *Public Administration Review*, 51, 31-41.
- Hummel, R. P. (1998). Practice illuminating theory. *Administrative Theory & Praxis*, 20, 150-158.
- Hummel, R. P. & Stivers, C. (1998). Government isn't us: The possibility of democratic knowledge in representative government. In: C. Simrell King, C. Stivers, & collaborators, *Government is us – Public administration in an anti-government era*. Pp. 28-48. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Kemmis, D. (1990). *Community and the politics of place*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Putman, R.D. (1995). Bowling alone: America's declining social capital. *Journal of Democracy*, 6, 65-78. doi:10.1353/jod.1995.0002
- Stivers, C. (2008). *Governance in dark times. Practical philosophy for public service*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press.
- Taylor, F.W. (1967). *The principles of scientific management*. New York, NY: Norton. Originally published in 1911, by Harper & Brothers Publishers.
- Wamsley, G.L. & Wolf, J.F. (Eds.). (1996). *Refounding democratic public administration. Modern paradoxes, postmodern challenges*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

AUTHOR PROFILE

Maria Veronica Elias, Ph.D. is an Assistant Professor in the Division of Public and Environmental Affairs, Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne. Her research focuses on theories of democracy and active citizenship; deliberative democracy and participative practice; community process and local governance (neighborhood group organizations; community-laden initiatives; direct governance; neighborhood and city planning; etc.); interpretive research, specifically, the phenomenology of neighborhood improvement projects; public organization and public management theories; comparative administration.

¹ The Administrative State is understood, in this article, as the normative practice and dialoguing that ought to guide the administration of the republic in the broadest political sense. That is, governance in support of the polity, the constitutional values, and the broadest public interest (Wamsley & Wolf, 1996).

² The ancient Greeks referred to the “political” as the place where the human being could find true freedom through thinking, deliberation, and action regarding the affairs of the state. The realm of publicness is where “everything appears in the light that can be generated only in a public space, in the presence of others” (Arendt 2005, p. 123), and therein lies the possibility for politics. In this sense, Arendt (2005) argued that “whenever people come together, the world thrusts itself between them, and it is in this in-between space that all human affairs are conducted” (p. 106).

³ Such as the faraway figure of representatives and their concomitant unawareness regarding their constituents’ concrete situations and concerns at the neighborhood level, and on a personal basis.

⁴ Arendt (2005) broke through the static understanding of politics as the separate functions of governing and being governed. She argued that all politics is practical, that is, it arises *in between* people. It is thus a fallacy to think of politics as existing inherently in the human being’s

substance: “Politics arises *between men*, and so quite *outside of man*. There is therefore no real political substance. Politics arises in what lies *between men* and is established as relationships” (p. 95)

⁵ A detailed discussion of the protocol used in this phenomenological research (as well as the raw interview transcriptions and interpretations) can be found in Elias (2008).

⁶ With the purpose to protect the identities of the subjects of this study, the author has replaced the real names of people and groups for pseudonyms. The pseudonyms for the neighborhood associations studied are: “Miraflores,” “Pagoda,” “Campinha,” and “Manizales.”

⁷ The “Campinha” group is a neighborhood organization that nucleates the neighbors of few streets in west Akron, Ohio. People meet frequently to talk about issues and concerns common to their area. They also undertake in projects to clean their streets, clean up graffiti, beautify gardens, fight crime, and socialize.

⁸ The neighborhood association “Miraflores” is a non-profit organization that works in different subcommittees, each of which deals with a specific issue (i.e., Crime and Safety, Housing and Historic Preservation, Beautification, among other ad hoc subcommittees).

⁹ Competencies, in this context, mean the belief in the ability to participate substantively in governance.

¹⁰ Counter-arguments to rugged individualism can be found in the case studies and examples discussed by Kemmis, D. (1990); Stivers, C. (2008); and Ehrenreich, B. (2009).

¹¹ See John Forester’s (1981) emphasis on the role of administrators as organizers of attention, as well as the facilitators of resources, technical expertise, and a space for the citizens to gather and deliberate about shared public issues. More recently, Forester (2009) made a case for public administrators as mediators of conflicting group decision making and deliberation processes—that is, the administrator as a mediator of public disputes.