The Concept of Planning Culture: Analysing How Planners Construct Practical Judgements in a Culturised Context

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ABSTRACT

Planners make judgements in their daily work – they define a problem, they formulate objectives or implement certain instruments to develop, with and for others, good or desirable places, neighbourhoods, cities or regions. These judgements are affected by both individual and collectively shared cognitive frames, representing the ‘cultural DNA’ through which planners perceive the world. To understand and compare how planning practices and judgements are constructed by the interplay of individual and collective frames from various actors and spheres (values of individual planners, norms of planning institutions, general societal values, etc.) in a specific culturised context, a conceptual framework is developed by adopting analytical categories from the fields of organisational sciences or cultural studies. The conceptual framework – consisting of the dimensions: cognitive frames of individual planners and planning institutions; actors and their interactions; the institutional context and the planning system; as well as the underlying societal beliefs, perceptions and values affecting planning and planners’ judgements – provides scientists with a new theoretical approach that allows analysing and comparing the situated particularities of planning practices on basis of a consistent system of criteria.

Keywords: Cognitive Frames of Individual Planners, Contextualised Knowledge, Planning Culture, Planning Institutions, Practical Judgements, Urban and Regional Planning

INTRODUCTION

Urban and regional planning as discipline is oriented towards attempting to shape and control the future built environment, especially with regard to the future distribution of people, activities and resources in cities and regions (e.g., Greed, 2000; Wildavsky, 1973). Planning can then be considered as ‘the guidance of change within a social system’ (Friedmann, 1967; 1987), which refers to the coordination and control of interdependent activities such as housing, land use planning, transport, water management or landscape planning.

In this context it is the task of planners to make choices, with and for others, what makes good or desirable places, neighbourhoods, cities or regions. Following Campbell (2002; see DOI: 10.4018/ijepr.2014040101
also Hoch, 1994; Schön, 1983), ‘judgement is therefore at the heart of what planners do’; this shows the necessity to better understand how planners are structuring and interpreting planning proposals and how they come to a final decision (Forester, 1996a: 248). Additionally, the decisions and practical judgements of planners are situated in specific cultural contexts involving a ‘combination of analytical, moral and emotive modes of thought’ (Healey 2009; see also Othengrafen & Reimer, 2013).

It can be concluded that planners always perceive the world through a ‘cultural lens’ which consists of both individual planners’ and commonly shared accumulated attitudes, values, rules, standards and beliefs of planning institutions. Following this argumentation this also means that planning culture can be understood as a cultural system that develops in the interplay of cultural codes, institutional settings, cognitive frames of the involved planners and other actors and their interactions. But how to use the concept of planning culture (e.g., Fürst, 2009; Keller et al., 1993, 1996; Othengrafen, 2010, 2012; Othengrafen & Reimer, 2013; Reimer, 2012) for the analysis of practical decisions and judgements of urban and regional planners? How to be sensitive to cultural practices and social diversity affecting the practical judgements of planners and thus also the outcome of planning processes (plans and concepts, the design of a planning process, urban structures, etc.)? How can the concept of planning culture be operationalized for this purpose? Which role do cultural embedded structures and institutions as well as the behavioural patterns of actors involved in these processes play with regard to the construction of pragmatic judgments of planners? How to distinguish between individual and institutional frames and structures?

To understand and compare the ‘situated particularities of practices’ (Healey, 2009), i.e. the cultural conditions for the practical judgements of planners, it is the aim of this article to develop a conceptual framework to provide scientists with a situated and contextualised understanding of planning. In comparison with other, recently published studies on planning cultures (e.g., Knieling & Othengrafen, 2009a; Othengrafen, 2010; Sanyal, 2005) the conceptual framework is distinctive as it defines planning culture anew, and as it concentrates on individual planners, their cognitive frames and values as well as their interactions with other actors to realise how they make choices or judgements with regard to planning objectives or instruments. By taking into account the institutional settings, cultural contexts and societal values, beliefs and norms in which planners are embedded and in which interactions between planners and planning institutions take place, it is also the aim to identify and explain the underlying ‘mechanisms’ which affect the pragmatic judgments of planners. This means that the conceptual framework is not only providing a structural approach how culture affects urban and regional planning; it rather presents a way to explain the situated particularities of practices by combining cultural or structural as well as actor-centred approaches (see also Ernste, 2012; Keller et al., 1993; Levin-Keitel & Sondermann, 2014; Scharpf, 2000).

THE ‘ART OF PLANNING’: PLANNERS CONSTRUCT PRACTICAL JUDGEMENTS IN A CULTURISED CONTEXT

It is widely recognised that urban and regional planning, at least in its (idealistic) theoretical underpinnings, differs from other forms of social action by its orientation towards technical or instrumental rationality, here referring to the attempts to understand and consider all the consequences of intended actions systematically (Allmendinger, 2002; Forester, 1996a; Rittel & Webber, 1973; Siebel, 2006; Wildavsky, 1973). Urban and regional planning thus follows a technocratic approach, in which the goals are clearly defined, the problem is clearly structured, data collection and analysis is achieved comprehensively according to the goals, and where the solutions are developed, evaluated and tested systematically (Davidoff...
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