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Finding Your Fit: A Proposal for Emerging Planning Scholars

By Milton Friesen

Abstract

The navigation of planning scholarship can be confusing for emerging scholars. I propose that it is useful to think about three different emphases that characterize academic planners: those of the broker, the scientist, and the synthesist. These emphases, in turn, have varying degrees and types of academic pertinence and professional implications. The proposed discussion framework may help planning scholars orient their research and planning support activities.

Challenge

The role of the academic planner is at once vital and contested in both professional and formal research settings. This is not surprising given that planning, by its very nature, occupies a professional position that interacts deeply with many other disciplines, professional practices, and public entities. Planning contexts are innately complex and include wide variations in role definitions within the professional arena and academic fields that contribute to planning (Campbell 2012; Forsyth 2012). My intention is to focus primarily on the different emphases that academic planners tend to pursue. I will argue that the diversity of scholarly emphases may be profitably understood through the use of three guiding and interrelated categories describing the different roles that may be assumed by an academic planner: planners may serve as brokers, scientists, or synthesists.

The triangular shape in Figure 1 acknowledges that the choices involved in finding a scholarly fit are more than simply binary and may involve a number of factors that exist in relationship with each other. These factors do not have hard edges, and may be blended and combined with each other. These three categories mentioned in the preceding paragraph have been presented for their utility; they might be characterized differently, and there may be more than three categories. The choice of these three roles is driven primarily by an interest in generating discussion and reflection around common academic planning functions. In particular, I hope that individuals' efforts to locate themselves in this paradigm will help emerging planning scholars better understand their particular abilities and

opportunities as they navigate what for those just starting out can be a challenging career space (Siemiatycki 2012).

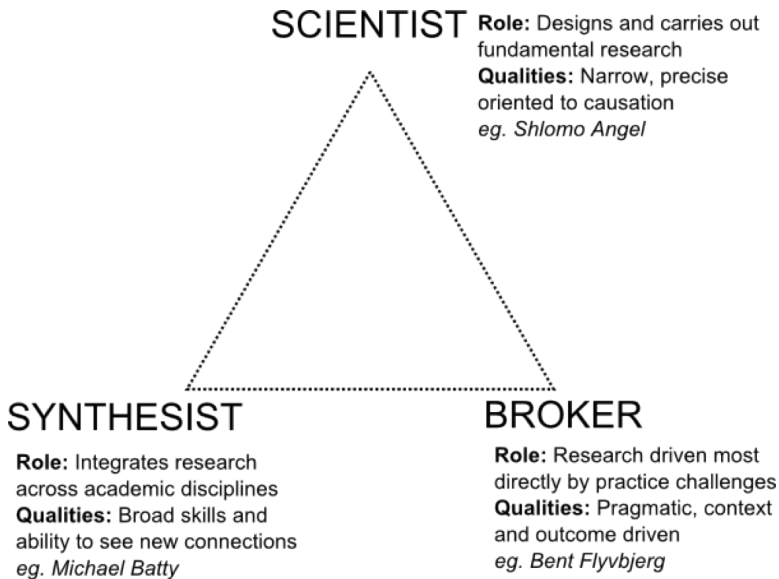


Figure 1: The triangular image creates a space where the interacting roles of broker, scientist and synthesist can be considered

Context

According to the Canadian Institute of Planners, “planning” is defined as “the scientific, aesthetic, and orderly disposition of land, resources, facilities and services with a view to securing the physical, economic and social efficiency, health and well-being of urban and rural communities” (Canadian Institute of Planners 2012). At the level of practice, these functions involve both the stewardship of land and a responsibility to participate in the complex interactions within the social, cultural, economic, transportation, and economic domains. The American Planning Association is less direct in their characterization of the field, but the concepts of community well-being, wholeness, balance, and problem-solving are clearly present in their discussions of professional functions (American Planning Association 2012). Academic planners are expected to contribute advanced research and analysis (Goldstein 2012) that supports and informs these ideas and the various functions of practicing planners, however varied the nature of those contributions may be. The Canadian Institute of Planners and the American Institute of Certified Planners both include mandates concerning the advancement of planning knowledge in their respective codes of conduct, which highlight the mutual professional

responsibility of both scholars and practitioners to increase effective planning in support of the sometimes varied visions of the common good that our city building reflects and that both scholarship and practice require (Friedmann 2000). The following proposal does not suggest the particulars of what a vision of the common good may be, but it does argue that planning scholarship is meaningfully diverse, coherent, and capable of serving the rich variance of the people and institutions that constitute our cities.

Proposed Framework

The use of three distinct but complementary emphases (Figure 1), those of the broker, the scientist, and the synthesist, may facilitate an understanding of the nature and scope of academic planning roles. Oriented at the three vertices of a triangle, the space within the triangle is simple enough to be useful as a 2D representation of the career space of contemporary planning scholarship, but rich enough to represent the considerable diversity present in the discipline. This arrangement is not intended to supplant the fuller treatment of scholarship and practice that others have articulated, nor is it intended to capture the many nuances of the differing cultures that characterize planning research (Forsyth 2012; Campbell 2012; Siemiatycki 2012). As a visually simplified representation of these and other complexities, the framework is intended to be a catalyst for discussion and a readily accessible tool to be judged on the basis of its utility; it is not offered as an analytically complete description. As a heuristic device, the triangle represents the planning field as a coherent whole within which a rich range of mixes of the three roles are possible. For emerging planning researchers, the triangle is intended to orient natural tendencies and ways of thinking about the field. At the same time, it allows room for those emphases to move and change over time or over the course of changing projects or contexts where different functions are required to meet changing goals and objectives.

Planning Scholar as Broker

One important role assumed by planning scholars is that of the broker (Siemiatycki 2012, 150). In this role, the core function is to serve as a link between the academic planning community and the municipal entities served by practicing professional planners. Within network research, brokers are understood as individuals who bring together different communities or groups that would otherwise not interact (Burt 1999). Planning scholars who engage closely with the practice will be more likely to have had direct experience with the public sector and may engage more frequently in consultations with politicians and community members (Hall 2001). Such community engagement can include the roles outlined

by Siemiatycki (2012). Listed in order of increasing embeddedness, these roles include public planner, contractor, community-based planner and activist.

The broker seeks strong interaction between the knowledge and expertise of scholarship and the specific challenges that municipal planners encounter. Brokers are particularly tuned to the pragmatic immediacy of the ambiguities, conflicts, contradictions, mistakes, and successes of planning practice as sources of research insight; it is likely that they spend more time in practice-driven contexts. The scientist spends more time and energy in foundational research, while the synthesist, aware of the challenges, invests more heavily in the usefulness of insight across disciplines. It is likely that individual broker-oriented qualities for scholars would include an ability to live with contradictory priorities, a willingness to embrace a high degree of diplomacy within the academy, but more particularly in planning departments, as well as a commitment to the challenges of navigating two sometimes very different worlds.

The broker does not merely function as an objective moderator but can, under the right conditions and with the right skills, exemplify within the academy a stronger role as mediator when more substantive cooperation and mutual benefit between differing parties is required (Forester 2008). Added to this is a requirement that the scholar possess a capacity to communicate the complexities that the two worlds represent both to the academic community through their research and writing (Roo and Silva 2010) to practitioners, and, in some cases, to the wider public, as well (Flyvbjerg 2012).

Broker functions can be useful in areas such as municipal finance where reasonably accessible financial data can be compared to issues such as those surrounding the cost of governance and population density (Holcombe and Williams 2008), the costs of different orders of government (Kitchen and Slack 2006), and the planning implications of city economics as it relates to exports, sprawl, and land use (Jacobs 1970; Angel 2012; Cox and Utt 2004; Blais 2010). Financial data is a matter over which the public, municipal governments, and practicing planners often interact. The broker's familiarity with such concerns may allow productive interactions of the various parties involved and lead to beneficial changes in accountability. Through their analysis of available financial and project management data, Flyvbjerg (2012) and his colleagues in Denmark have revealed chronic problems in public spending projections for megaprojects. They drew upon research and analytic skills honed in the academy, applied them to a practical public concern, and communicated those results in a well-developed media cycle aimed at the general public. The broker typically has a more direct concern for the public impact of specific planning-related research and undertakes problems where that impact is more likely. This

does not mean the work of a broker is only pragmatic but that it has a tendency to be informed by seeing near-term solutions.

Planning Scholar as Scientist

Planning scholars who are engaged primarily in researching social, environmental or spatial phenomena by means of empirical data tend to assume the role of the scientist (Goldstein 2012, 496). Ann Forsyth (2012) writes about the scientific frontier cultures of planning research. Research characterized as scientific in emphasis focuses on collecting data generated by devices or instruments rather than by human perception and, with sufficient definition, is sufficiently narrow to be able to approach causal assertions. Such empirical depth within specific domains can in turn be utilized to solve a variety of other problems by a range of scholars and professionals within planning and elsewhere (Bettencourt et al. 2010; Arthur 2009). Advanced use of mathematics, statistics, and the application of new technologies to generate data is common, and consistent laws, patterns, and generalizable descriptions of the dynamics involved in urban planning settings are sought. Gaining such insight requires long years spent honing the theories and methods of science and using that knowledge to carry out complex research programs where the results are intended primarily for other scientists.

An example of the work of a scientist is the use of remote sensing data and statistical methods for determining land use patterns related to growth in cities globally, an approach intended to contribute to a more robust science of cities (Angel 2012). The conclusions drawn from such activity are based on empirical data, and policy is developed to reflect those conclusions. As has been true in the past, science has been crucial to the development of cities and civilizations, and it would seem that there has been a trend within planning scholarship toward more empirical research (Forsyth 2012, 166). This supports the idea that the planning scholar as scientist is vital today and will continue to be important as both science and the nature of the challenges we face continue to change (Bausch and Flanagan 2012).

Planning Scholar as Synthesist

The third emphasis is the academic planner as synthesist (Campbell 2012, 143). The functions common to this role tend toward an ability to draw on a wide range of academic disciplines outside planning scholarship in ways that advance and inform planning-related challenges and contexts—human geography being one example (Phelps and Tewdwr-Jones 2008). The breadth necessary for such a role requires an ability to integrate meaningful insight and scholarly activity across and between disciplines in search of answers to the planning research questions being asked.

Michael Batty's work has grown over time to include a variety of disciplines as embodied in the highly synthetic approaches at work in complexity theory. His research has included agent based modeling, spatial use analysis, urban morphology, mathematics, social physics, and cultural adaptation among others (Batty 2012). In particular, the synthesist is able to see and connect various aspects of the human, natural, and built environment interactions that form the complex ground of our cities. It may be the case that there are new findings in mathematics that can contribute to solutions for outstanding planning problems or answer pressing questions that arise in deliberations about municipal issues. The synthesist has the ability to apply findings from across disciplines and, as a result, to generate novel and valuable insight. Again, this does not imply that a synthesist does not care about science or supporting planning practice through more pragmatic problem selection challenges. Instead, it reflects an orientation to research approaches that is able to move laterally across formal academic disciplines in pursuit of insight and knowledge that may not be available within narrowly defined disciplinary boundaries.

Examples of the synthesist emphases can be seen in discussions of planning theory where key ideas in philosophy, history, political science, and social theory are engaged in formulations of how both research and practice might be undertaken (Allmendinger 2009; Campbell 2012; Alexander 1987). A synthetic approach is represented by the various research design methodologies possible in planning scholarship. These tend to follow the trends in sociological research where the various perspectives on quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods research continue to be contested (Creswell 2009; Iossifoa 2011; Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004; Byman, Teevan, and Bell 2009; Palys 1997). Ethnographic, survey, economic, geographic, and many other data sources are relevant to planning scholars, and the meaningful integration of this diverse material requires the strong synthesist capabilities vital to the resolution of the seemingly intractable challenges that planners face (Forsyth 2012, 136).

Conceiving of academic planners as scholars with unique blends of these three capabilities will assist the explorations of emerging scholars without leading to overly simplified or reductive understandings of the field and its possibilities. Planning scholarship serves a highly complex context, and the range of roles that might be considered in the field is also complex. Devising a framework that has coherence without being reductive permits emerging scholars to contemplate where their particular interests, academic abilities, and preferred types of engagement may be best applied.

For new scholars, an exploration to discover what part of the planning scholarship landscape they best fit is valuable. I have argued that the differences between broker, scientist, and synthesist are characterized less by silos and boundaries and more by interacting emphases and meaningful

overlaps. In each of the emphases, the strengths and interdependencies are part of a more cohesive whole. Planning scholars may test the usefulness of this proposal by evaluating whether it generates insight into their own career and role. They may ask: Where on the diagram do I place myself and my work to date? Is there a pattern or tendency in my crafting of research questions and my use of different methods? The proposed framing concept is flexible, leaving room for variation, while valuing the differences that the various emphases contribute without being confining.

Emerging Scholars, New Challenges

By formally acknowledging the dynamic and varied types of roles possible (and any number of variations among them), planning research can continue to embrace exploratory, risk-taking, cross-pollinating approaches. This flexibility is well-suited to the highly complex nature of the planning environment where linear solutions and direct causality are rare (Lindblom 1959).

Our profound interconnectedness in an age of increasing data flows warrants scholars who embody new combinations of disciplines and who can design rigorous and credible research programs. They must weave insight across disciplines and diverse fields of knowledge, including the various dimensions of professional planning practice that scholarship is designed to support and, at some points, to inform. In countries or regions where there is an oversupply of planning PhDs, it may well be that specific emphases can be tuned to function in professional rather than scholarly capacities. While it may be easier for a broker to navigate into professional practice, the analytic and empirical rigor of the planning scientist may be more and more in demand in contexts where data is abundant and analysis scarce. Discussion of these ideas is valuable at both the academic and professional levels. We must continue to talk about the challenges and possibilities that planning scholarship faces in an increasingly urban, networked, communicative, and complex world.

Designing a useful way of orienting emerging planning scholars to the various themes present in planning research can foster important discussion about the types of problems these planners work with and the contexts that drive that work. No single heuristic will suffice to capture the full range and subtlety present in contemporary planning scholarship. Planning scholars work on significant challenges related to politics, society, environment, business and culture; this is not simply the work of technicians (Curtis 2012). From the development of research designs to the theoretical debates that will orient the long range direction of planning (Allmendinger 2009, 172), the roles of academic planners are richly diverse and increasingly valuable in a deeply interdependent world (Fischler 2012).

Advancing with a notional framework for emerging scholars informed by the concept of the broker, scientist and synthesist roles will contribute to the continued thriving of planning research, particularly as it relates to the education of those who will soon inherit the considerable challenges of building cities and undertaking the research needed to underwrite our best efforts.

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