

TORONTO COMMUNITY HOUSING: TENANT PARTICIPATION AND INFORMAL LEARNING

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Abstract

Due to intrinsic challenges in measuring informal learning, scholars have had relatively little interest in conducting empirical studies on the individual-level effects of participation. This qualitative study explores the informal learning of citizenry through political participation in the context of the Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC); it intends to narrow the gap between theoretical hypotheses and the perceived reality of educative effects of participation. This study, which collected interview data from 35 tenants and TCHC staff, also sheds light on our understanding of the shift in values, roles, and responsibilities of public servants calling for community participation and how such participatory mechanisms contribute to active learning of citizens.

Résumé

À cause des défis intrinsèques à mesurer l'apprentissage informel, des chercheurs démontraient relativement peu d'intérêt vers la réalisation d'études empiriques sur les effets de la participation au niveau individuel. Cette étude qualitative explore l'apprentissage informel des citoyens grâce à leur participation politique dans le contexte de la Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC), il a l'intention de réduire l'écart entre des hypothèses théoriques et la réalité perçue des effets éducatifs de participation. Cette étude, qui a recueilli des données provenant des entrevues de 35 locataires et de personnel de TCHC, offre aussi une plus grande connaissance de l'évolution des valeurs, des rôles, et des responsabilités des fonctionnaires appelant à la participation communautaire et de la façon dont ces mécanismes de participation contribuent à l'apprentissage actif des citoyens.

Introduction

For over two decades now, overwhelming attention has been given to the idea of active participation of communities and individuals in the development of policies and programs that affect their lives and livelihoods (e.g., Fung & Wright, 2003; Hall & Clover, 2005; Schugurensky, 2004). Normative and theoretical arguments have demonstrated that policy

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efficiency and effectiveness result from a more engaged citizenry within stronger forms of democracy (Fung & Wright). In addition to policy outcomes, there has been a view that upholds participation as a social instrument to build democratic capacities among citizens (Barber, 1984/2003; English & Mayo, 2012; Mansbridge, 1999; Pateman, 1970/1999; Santos, 2007). The core argument is that people's current involvement in politics is too narrowly defined to produce significant educative effects and that deeper political participation is an effective tool for fostering democratic learning within our societies (Barber; Fung & Wright; Lerner & Schugurensky, 2005).

Although numerous normative arguments indicate the benefits of participation on individual participants, there is a lack of empirical research to discern whether participation in fact affects the individual in any significant way. The literature mostly provides theoretical analysis supported by quantitative studies of voting patterns, volunteer engagement, and organizational membership (Campbell, 2006). Due to intrinsic challenges in measuring subtle learning and psychological effects attributed to participation, there has been less interest in conducting empirical studies on the educative effects of political participation on citizens (Mansbridge, 1999; Pinnington & Schugurensky, 2010). This paper is a case study that examines individual-level effects of participation as experienced and expressed by tenants in a city-wide participatory social housing management process in Toronto.

Research Context

The Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC) is the second-largest publicly owned housing authority in North America, and the largest in Canada. It houses 6% of the city's population (12% of the rental population) in 58,000 units across the city. Residents living in the TCHC's housing portfolio include seniors, families, refugees, new immigrants, and persons with special needs. The housing portfolio is varied and scattered across the city, comprising 351 high-rise and low-rise apartment buildings as well as roughly 800 houses and duplexes (Toronto Community Housing Corporation, 2006). The TCHC itself is a relatively new enterprise. It was formed in 2002 as part of the merger of the Metro Toronto Housing Corporation and the Toronto Housing Company.

The Tenant Participation System (TPS) is a state-sponsored practice of participatory community housing management in Toronto. The TPS works in the following way: within each Community Housing Unit (CHU), the manager develops local business plans and allocates resources in partnership with the tenant council, also known as the CHU council. Each CHU council develops an accountability framework so that tenants can keep the TCHC accountable on decisions made and issues that need to be addressed. Within the framework of the TPS, tenant representatives are also involved in budget allocation at both the CHU and city-wide levels. At the CHU level, through their input into the CHU business plans, tenant representatives have the opportunity to influence funding priorities, and through an annual city-wide participatory budgeting exercise, tenant representatives allocate scarce capital dollars in areas with the highest impact on tenants' lives (Toronto Community Housing Corporation, 2006). The TPS provides multiple spaces of interaction among tenants, staff and other community stakeholders, including:

- An election process encompassing nomination meetings, campaign activities, all-candidates' meetings, and interactions on election days;
- Tenant councils in which tenant representatives interact and engage in decision making and planning in the presence of other tenants, staff, and management;
- Informal socialization associated with tenant council activities;
- Tenants' informal sessions in which representatives get together occasionally on their own initiative to tour the neighbourhood and discuss local concerns, as well as enhance their knowledge of other buildings or communities;
- Tenant forums during which representatives from all over the city get together, attend workshops, exchange ideas, and socialize; and
- One-on-one interactions with authorities and other stakeholders.

In short, the TPS enables a collaborative management structure in which tenant representatives work with each other and with management. This paper focuses on the potential of such a participatory process to enable learning and development of new skills, attitudes, and knowledge for those tenants who participate.

Methodology

This research was done through a qualitative approach. To explore and examine learning through tenant participation, data were collected from several sources, namely one-on-one interviews with 15 staff of the TCHC who have been in charge of the design and implementation of the TPS (8 female, 7 male; 7 managers, 8 community staff) and 20 tenant representatives (9 male, 11 female) participating from 11 communities. The only common denominator among the tenant respondents is that they have been formally representing their communities in the TPS for at least one year. Each interview lasted about two hours and was organized in three parts: the first part consisted of open-ended questions on the respondent's history and life within the community housing portfolio; the second part was about their motivation to step forward and represent their community; and the third part was about their experiences with and perceptions of the dynamics of this multi-stakeholder participatory community management program. In this last section, I asked questions and probed to understand what the respondents explained as their learning. In earlier interviews the respondents were not eager to answer personal questions. For this reason, I decided to avoid asking personal questions and instead asked them an open-ended question on the story of their life however they wished to tell it. Utmost care was given to preserve the anonymity of the participants by masking any revealing characteristics.

The tenant participants were purposively sampled to ensure a variety of age groups (from youth to the elderly), levels of engagement (from those who had low levels of participation at the meetings and planning forums to those who were very active), and perspectives on the TPS (from those who appeared to be quite critical and combative to those who seemed to be quite amenable and positive). Staff members were sampled based

on the key positions they held within the TPS: CHU managers, community engagement staff, and those involved in city-wide policy making and implementation of the TPS.

As well, over 100 hours of observation was conducted of social events, community council meetings, property management meetings, and interactions between tenant representatives, staff, and the managers of one community. This community was a key site of interest because it was a populated inner-city neighbourhood that faced a number of challenges along with the prospect of a major redevelopment of the housing stock. This situation created extensive opportunities for discussion and problem solving in the community. The focus on one community helped to pair the observations with interviews of the participants and staff of the same community. This enabled a rich understanding of the processes, interactions, and perspectives involved in the TPS.

Participation and Learning: A Conceptual Framework

Citizenship in the participatory mode, or as a membership in political community, is "mindful of the extent to which citizens take it upon themselves to participate in civic and political life" (Mettlre, 2002, p. 362),¹ and it is promoted through allowing citizens' voices in crafting policies and programs that affect their lives (Fung & Wright, 2003). Rousseau (1762/1968), in his classic work *The Social Contract*, argues that the very qualities required of individuals for governance to work successfully are those that the process of participation itself develops and fosters. This work emphasizes the fact that there is an interrelationship between the working of institutions and the psychological qualities and attitudes of individuals interacting with them (Pateman, 1970/1999). Building on Rousseau's argument, Pateman suggests that large housing developments are good sites to provide an opportunity for residents to participate in decision making and that "the psychological effects of such participation might prove extremely valuable in this context" (p. 109).

An extensive body of literature addresses the assumed effects of participation on those who participate. Barber (1984/2003), in his seminal book *Strong Democracy*, argues that participatory democracy, due to its deliberative nature and its roots in the philosophy of praxis, has potential for politically and socially transformative implications. Schugurensky (2004) also emphasizes that participation in public policy planning and public service delivery, such as participatory budgeting, provides a significant context for learning democratic values and skills. Cooke (2000) highlights the core of the argument, that "participation improves the moral, practical or intellectual qualities of the participants; it makes them not just better citizens but also better individuals" (p. 948). Deliberation is believed to illuminate self-centred ideas and helps citizens look beyond their self-interest to the larger public interest, developing a mutual understanding among those who participate (Campbell, 2006; Schugurensky, 2004). Social interactions increase the opportunity for people to confront others with different experiences, worldviews, and viewpoints from their own. Such interactions also enable people to share their experiences and learn from

1 In contrast to the participatory mode, *citizenship* has traditionally had a more limited usage, being defined as a legal status in which the state extends social, civil, and political guarantees upon citizens through law and public policy.

those of others. Ryfe (2002) points out that “the most important result of these interactions is the construction and maintenance of a shared sense of belonging” (p. 370). As Scott (2000) argues, we forge our individual interests into shared and common interests through the process of participation (p. 263).

In a democracy in which citizens run the government, civic participation contributes not only to the betterment of society but also to citizens’ own growth as active and responsible citizens. Accommodating deliberative processes and participatory action plans in the practice of public service delivery not only enhances the effectiveness of service delivery but also improves the democratic learning and competencies of citizens. This process of civic engagement extends opportunities for citizens to exercise and consolidate their rights while it reshapes communities and individuals’ subjective experience of what it means to be a citizen. In other words, it provides grounds for citizens to act democratically and to educate themselves through this civic practice (Merrifield, 2002; Mettler, 2002).

In sum, the literature on participatory democracy recognizes participation as an important domain of learning democratic citizenship, with the underlying assumption that the benefits of participation are personal. Here the learning associated with participation is categorized as informal, for it occurs outside any formal or institutionalized curriculum.

The term *informal learning* projects itself vividly and there seems to be a consensus among scholars on the general definition of the term. Livingstone (1999) defines the concept vis-à-vis other related learning paradigms: “Formal education denotes full-time school programs; non-formal education refers to classroom-based courses; informal learning refers to all other deliberate forms of self-directed or collective learning” (p. 3). Foley (1999) distinguishes incidental learning from informal learning, arguing that incidental learning occurs through people’s engagement in social action at work and in their lives, while informal learning occurs as “people teach and learn from each other” (p. 2). Schugurensky (2000) views informal learning as a kind of learning that occurs “outside the curricula of educational institutions and not [necessarily] outside educational institutions, because informal learning can also take place inside formal and non-formal educational institutions” (n.p.). In other words, informal learning, Schugurensky argues, is not associated with any “educational institutions, institutionally authorized instructors or prescribed curricula” (n.p.), and as such, informal learning may occur within institutions but independent from planned curricula. Schugurensky also draws a distinction between informal and incidental learning; he incorporates incidental learning as a category, defining it as learning that occurs when the learner has no prior intention to learn and would become conscious of his/her learning only through reflection following the experience.

The concept of informal learning has been applied in various research settings. Laiken, Edge, Friedman, and West (2008) argue that in organizational contexts, the “most sustainable” [learning] benefits come from informal learning, which they define as “that which happens naturally, as part of daily work” (p. 190). This definition is relational, based in social interactions that engender communities of learning. Organizations can actively foster this type of engagement; as the study suggests, “organizational climate and culture is critical in creating an environment which enables informal learning and shared leadership in the workplace to thrive” (p. 198). A key avenue for nurturing informal learning is to provide opportunities for “more distributed, participative leadership”—in other words, to

integrate participatory and democratic values and practices into the workplace (p. 195). This includes the ability to take part in decision making, a process that requires employees to have access to information and a sense of being trusted (p. 196).

In the context of participatory budgeting, Lerner (2010) argues that participants learn in a variety of ways and that "at the individual level, this learning fosters better citizens, while at the collective level the effects of learning are more mixed" (p. 242). Research on participatory budgeting in diverse global contexts suggests that citizens engage in learning in the areas of "knowledge, skills and attitudes" and that most of this learning occurs in informal contexts such as "casual talk with peers and staff" (p. 245). Lerner notes that participatory budgeting can serve as an educational and political "equalizer" through narrowing the gap between participants in terms of knowledge and engagement (pp. 246, 249).

While there may be general consensus on the definition of informal learning, it is still a contested concept. Billett (2008) asserts that *informal learning* is a less than helpful term because it fails to account for the relationship between participants and their communities and because it relegates participants' experiences to the margins when they in fact represent significant and central forms of learning (p. 22). Billett argues that a more appropriate term is *participatory practices* because it gives credence to learning in community settings and speaks to "the duality between the affordances of the social world (i.e., the communities in which individuals participate) and how individuals elect to engage in those practices" (p. 23).

It is possible to acknowledge this criticism while maintaining the conceptual usefulness of informal learning by emphasizing its relational aspect and by seeking to centre it in relation to more formal types of learning. Accordingly, the learning of tenants, presented in the following section, is categorized as informal because it took place outside the curricula of any educational institutions. In this context, informal learning has been sometimes intentional, self-directed and/or incidental, and recognized through tenants' reflections prior to or at the time of the interviews.

Tenants' Informal Learning

In broad terms, the TPS provides tenant representatives with opportunities to exercise leadership within their housing communities, and the assumption is that they significantly yet informally learn through these opportunities. Due to its procedural, intertwined, and multi-layered nature, tenants' informal learning cannot be convincingly catalogued in distinct categories; nonetheless, drawing from the instances, experiences, and consequences of the respondents' informal learning, the research findings suggest four categories. The first is knowledge about the political and organizational structure of social housing management and municipal governance. The second is learning that augments tenant representatives' social, political, and civic skills that help them engage with and affect the community at large. The third is learning that enhances their sense of self, self-esteem, and self-confidence, encouraging tenants to pursue community change through political action. And the fourth is learning that improves the practice of community management itself.

Learning the Political and Organizational Structure of Social Housing

One major motivation for tenants to step forward as representatives of their communities was the potential for learning about the organization of the TCHC (Foroughi & McCollum, 2008). Indeed, tenants acknowledged that this position provided an opportunity for them to educate themselves and the community on the workings of the organization in hopes of securing more attention and resources for their communities. Being mindful of the need to learn how decisions are made and resources allocated, some respondents even described how they pursued self-directed informal learning projects to figure out how best they might exercise their influence over the TCHC, while others explained that they learned through reflections on their experiences within the processes and initiatives of the TPS.

As a result of participation, tenant representatives became more aware of the major policies governing social housing in Toronto, including how decisions are made and resources allocated at the macro level. As a result, they explained that they were able to develop insights into how they could effectively influence the bureaucracy. One representative, a 60-year-old woman who has lived in community housing for over 20 years and has been on the council for a little more than three years, explained: “I learned what button to push to get something done ... I learned how the system works and who you should get hold of to get something done.”

Tenant representatives, like this woman, also became more aware of wider legal structures relevant to social housing in Toronto. Another tenant representative, a 50-year-old woman and single parent, explained how she studied the relevant laws and bylaws: “I went from A to Z.” She intended to advocate for residents in her building who face problems and do not receive an appropriate response from the management. One example of a problem she described is a refugee family with little knowledge of English who are not aware of the rent options available for refugees.

Tenant representatives are involved in budgeting processes at both the community level and in city-wide capital funding forums. Through this engagement, respondents reported acquiring a better understanding of the criteria and mechanisms involved in allocating monetary resources. Their involvement in the capital budgeting process allowed them to learn how to apply for funding to address the capital needs of their communities. Reflecting on her experience at one of the capital budget allocation meetings, a young newcomer tenant from Somalia who had been in Canada for fewer than three years and who was on this council for over a year, explained: “I learned a lot, actually, when I went through the capital fund meeting; I believe that was a great experience because it actually showed all the politics that was involved in these communities.”

Another respondent, an immigrant who had been living in community housing with his family for over five years, clarified that the TPS allowed him to learn a lot about the TCHC on his own, through “slowly gaining experience” in his role. Now he went “outside of the council to get things done,” and for him it seemed that “the head office is the most valuable place to get things done.” He mentioned that his knowledge about the TCHC had gained him respect among other representatives and the staff; even the community housing manager relied on his information on the TCHC and social housing policies. Using

his knowledge of the workings of the organization, he proposed solutions to some of the bureaucratic problems tenants face when applying to be transferred to another unit.

Some respondents mentioned that they knew how to make the organization move into action by applying pressure both vertically, via higher levels of government, and horizontally, via other authorities within the organization. One long-term resident, a 60-year-old woman who had lived in community housing for over 15 years, explained that she had approached other levels of government to express her concerns regarding her place of residence:

I, for the first time, dared to go outside [of the TCHC] ... I made it my business to get to know my councillor, I went to Queen's Park, I phoned City Hall ... and got the permission to speak to the council ... so I spoke a couple of times to the council, [until it was resolved].

Sixteen of the 20 respondents knew their elected officials and three mentioned that they met with their respective councillors. Respondents also reported that their knowledge about municipal politics and local affairs—including an understanding of jurisdictional limits and responsibilities—had significantly increased. Therefore, it can be acknowledged that the participatory process provided an opportunity for tenant representatives to educate themselves and the community on the workings of TCHC in the hopes of securing more attention and resources for their communities. Some respondents pursued strategies to learn how they could secure resources for specific problems in their community.

Learning to Engage with and Affect the Wider Community

This category of learning motivates change in tenants' civil and civic behaviour. Within the TPS, tenant representatives are in constant communication with other tenants, other tenant representatives, and TCHC staff and management. This, as tenant respondents described, increases their connections with their neighbours and people from other communities, helping them develop a sense of belonging and community even beyond their own buildings. As this middle-aged single mother with over two decades of experience in community-housing explained: "I have made friendships not only in my own CHU but in all others ... Honestly, I built a relationship with these other individuals and ... [they became an] extended part of my family." She further highlighted how this process helped her develop a greater understanding of the problems and needs of the people in her community and in neighbouring communities. "Something you think is so trivial to you is explosive to the other person ... So it's a good experience. I see myself different in the way that I have gained more knowledge ... I have seen a lot of different things in different perspectives."

From this and other stories, and my long-term involvement with the TPS, I can argue that the participatory process connects individuals within this diverse population and has a potential to forge friendships and co-operations in such diverse communities.

Learning Confidence

Associated with increased knowledge and active involvement in the TCHC and the wider community are an increased sense of confidence and feeling that one can affect

decisions that once seemed remote. Tenant representatives reported how their experience with the participatory system contributed to feeling more capable of influencing political and management decisions within their community and even beyond the organization. A middle-aged recent immigrant from Bangladesh explained, “I never campaigned before. I’ve never gotten involved in politics [and this experience] made me feel like I can do something ... the participatory budget was a really good experience because we were able to fight for what we wanted but in a democratic way.”

The younger respondents, those under 30 years of age, also mentioned that their participation made them feel that they “mattered.” A young Somali woman described a feeling of fulfilment that her participation had motivated other youth to become active; this gave her “a good feeling motivating to continue.” During the first months of her involvement with the council, when she was the only youth and the meetings were dominated by older and long-term residents, she felt too shy to talk about her concerns. Gradually she realized that she should not “hold back” her ideas and concerns; she made it her priority to say what she had to say, and she soon found support in the council and from the staff.

Another active tenant representative, an older woman living in senior housing who had been involved in the “making of the participatory process since day one,” said that participation had taught her that she would “never be intimidated by titles ... people at any rank are still people.” She mentioned that, prior to her engagement; she felt “uncomfortable facing property managers and the housing staff.” She added that participation had radically changed the way she used to complain: “Instead of passive and tedious nagging and begging that the management has to do this and that ... TCHC has opened up for tenants to be part of the CHU management, so if you do not participate you should not complain, but if you do participate you could.” She noted that there were still challenges but “we can now be part of the change we would like to see.” The importance of learning self-confidence should not be underestimated. It forms the cornerstone from which participants have the courage to learn how to affect the wider community.

Learning to Enhance the Quality of Participatory Management

It is becoming evident that informal learning plays a significant role in shaping respondents’ overall learning experiences. There are immediate consequences to tenants’ informal learning in regards to the functioning of community management and their participatory behaviour.

Tenants’ behavioural and attitudinal changes through their participation are indicators that the learning is an evolving process. As tenant representatives continue to work with each other, they learn how to better interact and work as a council. I observed the working of the tenant councils over three years, during which I noticed that over time the meetings changed from chaotic events with people interrupting to more respectful and organized proceedings as tenants learned how to better facilitate meetings and gained deliberative skills. Nineteen out of the 20 tenant respondents emphasized that they had learned skills, such as how to better resolve conflicts, chair council meetings, organize group work, and make collective decisions. One respondent, an ex-law enforcement officer from Jamaica, believed tenant representatives learn a great number of skills by

simply exercising their roles in the council; he explained that at early council meetings, the manager had to chair and facilitate the session because the tenants did not understand how to balance and manage the situation. Now it was the tenants themselves who chaired, recorded, and facilitated the council meetings. He referred to his own learning through chairing a council meeting:

I remember one of the things I learned was how to chair the meeting and so I did it; I listened to everybody's business ... like a judge ... set the stage ... read the minutes, confirm them ... made notes ... I balanced it out ... you got to wait for everybody gets a chance ... if you do not balance it you going to choke ... you got to be fair so everybody can put what they want to put in ... you cannot get hot-headed ... you can't be for one side you have to be for everybody.

He also mentioned how his council has become more accepting of each other and tolerant of conflicts and differences. Staff members also noticed attitudinal changes; two community housing managers spoke of changes in tenant representatives' behaviour as they gained experience and confidence in their new roles: "I have observed changes; some have started initiatives on their own ... Some have started their safety committee. I helped with the [X] association and then it led to other initiatives. As they get involved they get initiatives on their own, which is very good," said the first. According to the second, "Tenant rep[resentative]s organized stuff. As they grow, it has been a help for the CHU and the council. As they understood how [the] budget works it helped. They also know how to apply pressure, how to negotiate."

It becomes clear that respondents learned skills in chairing council meetings, group work, and facilitating collective decisions and had, over time, exercised and learned the values and practices that improve the quality of the participatory community management process.

Paths to Informal Learning

In the previous section, the types and significance of informal learning acquired by tenant participants were introduced and discussed. This was to acknowledge the pedagogical effects of deliberative and participatory practices on participants. It became evident that informal learning of various kinds and degrees occurs through the TPS. To further understand informal learning in this context, and drawing from interviews and observations, I next discuss the four paths to respondents' informal learning.

Learning through Strategizing

It has long been a common practice to exclude social housing tenants from the arenas in which their welfare is planned and administered. As both tenant representatives and staff emphasized, there has been an environment of distrust between tenants and housing authorities. In conversation with tenants, I soon realized that there was deep distrust in formal institutions and structures as supportive partners in achieving a higher quality of living. In addition to formal channels to express concerns or exert influence over a decision

or a plan, tenant representatives showed interest in pursuing informal and unofficial ways to address their concerns. Among those interviewed, the preferred strategy to influence decisions was through informal networks within the power structure or through informal negotiations with managers and other decision makers. As pointed out earlier, some tenant representatives were eager to “find out where to push the button so that TCHC moves,” “to find where the money is at TCHC,” or, “to find out how to negotiate to get more resources.” These respondents deliberately engaged in learning projects to equip themselves with effective strategies to find out how to achieve such goals. These were self-directed learning projects with neither a curriculum nor an instructor attached. Although informal, the learning was intentional.

For tenant representatives, strategizing was a continuous process of exploring the various dimensions of a decision-making structure, policy, or program within the organization and the wider community. This form of active learning was both intentional and conscious, and the knowledge gained informed the strategies they used to voice their concerns, influence decisions, or change undesired circumstances.

Learning through Struggle

Struggling with different stakeholders constituted an important domain in which informal learning occurred. There were struggles between tenant representatives and the management over a decision or a priority, conflicts over scarce resources among tenant representatives, problems mobilizing the general tenant population for a cause, and difficulties coordinating partnerships in a CHU. Below is an example of learning gained through struggle.

Among tenant representatives, the more pragmatic and active ones tend to come forward with exhaustive knowledge about their locale and its associated problems, often with proposals and solutions in hand. Facing challenges like insufficient and limited resources and the lengthy processes of decision making at the council can chip away at their enthusiasm to continue in their roles. Two primary responses to this problem came out in the interviews. One was pursuing informal channels to find a solution, while the other was pursuing formal structures to achieve goals. Some tenant representatives decided to bypass the formal process and look for personal pipelines to management, while others stayed on and struggled through the transparent channel of the councils. For the latter group, there was significant informal learning. For example, a long-term resident who called himself a guardian for his building described his experience of trying to increase the efficiency of council meetings by limiting the exhausting negotiations within the council. In his experience, the best way to do this was to promote a cooperative and “friendly culture” by developing “mutual respect” among representatives, which, for him, could be achieved through acknowledging and recognizing each other’s needs and respecting each other’s opinions. One has to “listen very well by eyes, ears, mind and heart,” he emphasized. By the same logic, he learned not to say “you are wrong” but to say “I disagree.” As is illustrated by this example, this tenant representative had no prior intention of testing the importance of values like mutual respect. His purpose was, rather, to speed up council decision making. However, following these experiences, he learned the utility of applying such values in pursuing one’s interest in a democratic setting. This is one example of the conscious but unintended learning that occurred through struggle for the

tenant representatives. This kind of informal learning is more subtle than the previous category and helps to internalize values.

Learning by Doing and Observing

Tenants acquired and developed many of their skills as representatives on the job, learning while doing the job. As indicated above, tenant representatives reported learning to organize, chair, facilitate, and even report on council meetings by simply observing and then doing it themselves. Staff also noted that tenant representatives became skilful at managing council meetings. Those involved in proposal development and review in various committees expressed that their experience had been helpful in learning new skills. Those who made presentations to councils also emphasized their learning of interpersonal skills.

Tenant representatives need to upgrade their knowledge and skills to properly perform such tasks as organizing and leading council meetings, reporting on these meetings, writing and reviewing proposals, and making presentations. This upgrade takes place mostly through doing and experimentation. Tenant representatives are either assigned or voluntarily choose to do specific tasks as part of their duties. They intentionally and consciously attempt to learn the required skills through observation at council meetings as well as non-formal instruction from staff or more experienced peers. Membership in specialized committees demands that the representatives have additional skills and knowledge of a specific area (e.g., proposal review, program evaluation, and communication technology).

From the highlights of the interviews in the previous sections, it appears that learning by doing is significant in acquiring the basic skills needed to carry out the primary responsibilities of a tenant representative, which is to hold and facilitate meetings. However, based on the interviews it can also be argued that the degree of learning of such applied knowledge and skills depends on the level of engagement and the desire to learn.

Learning through Engagement and Socialization

Social engagement also affects tenants' perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours in an often unnoticeable fashion. This is referred to as tacit learning—that is, it cannot be easily articulated and is therefore challenging to document. Tenant representatives have neither intended to learn nor consciously realized that they have learned. Yet this unconscious learning can be a significant aspect of their learning experience. Tacit learning, here, generally occurs within the interactive environment and somewhat defined framework of the TPS. Tenant representatives in their interviews referred to their awareness of others' needs and realities as a result of their participation as representatives. Also, staff pointed to the positive changes in tenants' attitudes toward people from other cultures. Throughout the interviews, tenant representatives referred to their increased involvement in communicating with and sometimes helping tenants with whom they had no prior contact, including tenants from other buildings and communities.

In council meetings, tenant representatives' interactions follow a pre-set behavioural code of conduct common to public meetings. Enforced obedience of democratic values aims to keep council functioning smoothly and guarantees the rights

of individual tenant representatives. The code of conduct serves primarily to control the meeting and is not intended to educate representatives on democratic principles. Just as legislation mandating anti-racism or anti-sexism does not necessarily induce citizens to become genuinely tolerant anti-racists and believers in sexual diversity, the participatory framework may not directly educate tenants on diversity, tolerance, and acceptance of other tenants as equal counterparts. It can, however, promote such values by providing spaces in which the opportunities for informal learning and internalization of such values can increase.

Tenant representatives' attendance at council meetings is a continuous exercise in respecting such explicit democratic values, and it subtly facilitates the internalization of those values. As found through the interviews, there is no other forum for tenant representatives to openly discuss and learn about relevant issues like diversity and multiculturalism. Thus, the TPS constitutes a rare opportunity for tenants to interact and familiarize themselves with the realities of other people's lives and cultures. This potentially enhances their understanding of others and creates bonding relationships among them.

The researcher observed councils in which tenant representatives from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds (e.g., devout Muslims and Jews) worked together cooperatively. While it cannot be concluded that participation transformed their attitudes toward each other, it was apparent that they were more aware of each other's needs and realities, which, in turn, could help develop mutual understanding and collaborative endeavours within their communities.

All of these experiences illustrate that the social spaces of interaction, referred to earlier, created through the participatory process lead to educative effects. In these spaces, socialization and interaction among tenants could impact their perception of the world around them and consequently affect their value systems.

In sum, tenant respondents, as representatives of their constituencies, are constantly involved in reflecting on the problems of their communities. They are also asked to reflect on issues that are beyond their own communities. Through the interviewees' active reflection they suggested that an important aspect of their learning involved their attempt to strategically achieve the best outcome based on existing resources. The interviews revealed that this learning was self-directed through informal conversations with others and through the planning processes in council and committee meetings. In these situations, tenants actively strategized to secure more resources for their communities. Due to limited available resources, competing demands, and the slow responses of the bureaucracy, tenants also discussed how they struggled to achieve improved services. This process of struggle was prominent in the interviews and seemed to have informal educative effects on participants. In addition, representatives learned the skills necessary to increase the managerial efficiency of the council mainly through observation and direct involvement in carrying out organizational responsibilities. The inevitable socialization among tenant representatives, staff, management, the general tenant population, and other stakeholders also provided a significant domain for informal learning.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study outlines some connections between tenants' activities and informal learning within a program in which they practice active participation on issues that affect their welfare. Informal learning through the TPS emerged into several themes. Learning related to increased self-confidence and overcoming fear of authority helps transform the traditional tenant-management relationship into "be[ing] part of the change" tenants would like to see. An increased understanding of the needs within one's own community is connected to one's understanding of the needs of other communities, and an increased understanding of how change happens in one's community, in the organization, and at relevant policy levels. In addition, the skills learned through the participatory process also result in increased managerial efficiency—a self-looping process whereby the participatory project improves over time and through the very act of participation. In this context, informal learning occurs both intentionally, as a result of conscious planning through informal paths, or tacitly, acknowledged through self-reflection on one's experiences. Based on the interviews and the observations, tenant representatives rely heavily on informal learning to enhance their effectiveness as advocates for their communities.

Based on the above, informal learning helps to (1) enhance individuals' knowledge; (2) develop individuals' social and political skills; (3) improve individuals' attitude toward self, community, and polity; and (4) further individuals' social engagement and practice. Therefore, the effects of tenant learning can be placed into three distinct categories: communicative, political, and civic effects. The findings clearly illustrate the tenant representatives' informal learning as pertaining to social, interpersonal, and communicative skills. These kinds of informal learning help develop individuals' social character (Campbell, 2006; Cooke, 2000; Schugurensky, 2004). Enhanced knowledge of political institutions and local governance and an increased sense of political efficacy can be categorized as the political effects of informal learning. These two kinds of effects combined result in enhanced civic competencies, the most cited effect of participation in the literature (Barber, 1984/2003; Campbell; Pinnington & Schugurensky, 2010). The previous section presented evidence that tenant representatives are more engaged in and committed to their community, as they seek solutions to local problems more than before. Coupled with this enhanced commitment is a set of skills in communication, negotiation, and facilitation; this is the evident effect of the learning that helps build tenants' civic capacity.

Hence, participating in the TPS provides a significant opportunity for tenant representatives to engage in multiple learning situations. These experiences enable a kind of learning that benefits the individual and the community as a whole. Learning in this situation has been both an expectation and a cumulative outcome of the tenant representatives' engagement as it informs their role in their communities and in society at large. Tenants' informal learning is embedded in tenants' real experiences in the participatory process. In other words, tenants' learning impacts their strategies for participation and their participation influences their learning. It is a mutually dependent process in which the consequences of learning shape further action and action dictates further learning.

Based on this research, one solid conclusion that can be drawn is that through rearranging governance structures, removing bureaucratic impediments to tenant

participation, and providing deliberative public spaces for active engagement of tenants in this praxis of community management, learning is integrated into and designed within the domain of community housing management; tenants, while exercising and consolidating their rights, reshape their subjective experience of what it means to be a citizen. This confirms earlier research that more distributed and participative leadership nurtures informal learning (Laiken et al., 2008) of various kinds (Lerner, 2010), and that informal learning is a subjective experience (Merrifield, 2002) that cannot be specifically designed but designed for (Wenger, 1998). However, the learning does affect the knowledge, attitude, values, and behaviour (Lerner) of the participants and it is acquired within social spaces created as a result of participation (Pinnington & Schugurensky, 2010). Such significant learning, though labelled informal, is central to tenants' experiences as participatory agents of their communities. In response to Billett's (2008) concern with the implicit message of informal learning as insignificant, the researcher also suggests referring to informal learning acquired through participatory practices as participatory learning.

Outside the scope of this paper lies the story of power struggle, or as Cooke and Kothari (2001) put it, the tyranny of participation inherent in such participatory engagements within diverse and complicated urban settings. This paper is not an examination of TPS; rather, it has been about tenants' learning through the very struggle of participation. One active element in shaping tenants' learning is the conduct of TCHC's staff. They are the hosts and conveners of the practice of participation; the curriculum is at least partially defined through the dynamic interactions between tenants and staff. The staff who used to be (and in some cases still are) property managers and welfare bureaucrats are now playing a major role in developing collaborative relationships with tenants who used to be their formal clients and recipients of services for which they had no say. What becomes highly evident is that facilitating a tenant-driven community planning process requires a shift in the values, roles, and responsibilities of conventional public servants. Rather than control by property managers and bureaucrats, this calls for housing authorities to lead by stepping back and complementing managerial efficiency and formal accountability by instilling political sensitivity, responsiveness to community values, and social equity into the practice of property management. Further research on understanding the power struggle and the dynamism between the staff and tenants' agency and how their relationships and interactions constitute and characterize spaces of participation is extremely beneficial to community planners and adult educators interested in exploring how such collaborations are forged and how participatory processes contribute to active learning among tenants (see Foroughi, 2013).

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