

Understanding how the interplay of thought and emotion shape humans' inner and outer lives is critical for skillful planning.

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# TOOLS FOR THE TRADE

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JAPA TAKEAWAY

## PLANNING'S EMOTIONAL PARADOX

Emotions motivate public servants—but planners' education, training, and professional norms lead us to try to ignore or avoid our own feelings. *By Ward Lyles, AICP, and Stacey Swearingen White*

"What I hear when I'm being yelled at is people caring loudly at me."

—Amy Poehler as public servant  
Leslie Knope on Parks and Recreation  
(Season 1, Episode 2)

PLANNERS SEEK CREDIBILITY as being "objective," and they also seek self-protection from conflict and burnout by creating emotional distance from their work.

PLANNERS' ABILITY TO acknowledge the full range of feelings that make them human and give meaning to their work can create opportunities for them to build mutual understanding, enhance trust, and foster partnerships.

Planners should reflect more on how they engage emotions and how their approach impacts their effectiveness. Deepening emotional, social, and cultural intelligence holds considerable potential for meeting our field's aspiration goals of fostering more compassionate and inclusive communities.

### The emotional paradox and brain science

The emotional paradox of public engagement arises when planners need to minimize and contain the influence of emotions in their work. They must respond to and manage strong emotions from the public while simultaneously tamping down, censoring, or disguising their own. This generates tension as planners navigate complicated relationships characterized by unpredictable and precarious emotions, especially

HALF A CENTURY ago, Sherry Arnstein depicted citizens caring loudly in reaction to their lack of power in public engagement processes in "A Ladder of Citizen Participation," her 1969 landmark article in the *Journal of the American Planning Association*. (It is still the most downloaded JAPA article of all time). Arnstein's scrutiny of systemic barriers to public participation continues to inform public engagement theory and practice, reflecting Arnstein's lasting influence.

But what does it say about our work as public servants that angry voices and awkward interactions remain so commonplace that they serve as plotlines for sitcoms?

Planning scholars have recently called for more attention to the emotional dimensions of our profession, building their case in part on recent developments in psychology and neuroscience. Increasingly, the work of Arnstein through to today points to an emotional paradox of public engagement, which cuts in two directions:

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when planning exposes long legacies and current realities of conflict, trauma, and oppression in communities.

Key insights about human brains from recent psychology and neuroscience research help us to understand basic processes that generate and shape emotions. Planners' brains respond to experiences just like everyone else's. Focusing almost exclusively on dispassionate, rational analysis—as planners typically are trained to do—is perilous because it implies planners somehow can escape their ever-present emotions.

Understanding how the interplay of thought and emotion shape humans' inner and outer lives is critical for skillful planning. So we turn to key insights about brains from recent work in neuroscience and psychology.

- Emotional threats provoke planners to flee, fight, or freeze.
- Planners' brains use cognitive shortcuts without "rational" thinking to make decisions.
- Planners' brains are moldable, rewired based on experiences and patterns that we can intentionally or inadvertently reinforce, including reactions to emotional threats.
- Planners work in an intellectual tradition and society that stigmatize and discredit emotion. This tradition is mired in stereotypes that reinforce systems of privilege and oppression.
- Planners have limited perceptions of others' emotions and cannot assume that they can accurately interpret them.

To ignore these insights in our professional work amounts to naive hubris and constrains our effectiveness in our most meaningful work with the public.

### Brains in action in the public sphere

You will have trouble finding practical guidance for overcoming the emotional paradox in contemporary sources of guidance and training for planners. Our analysis of APA reports, AICP training sessions, and

### QUESTIONS FOR SELF-REFLECTION

**AM I ATTUNED** to my own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, including those I would prefer not to experience?

**DO I HAVE RELIABLE** practices or tools to manage my emotions, like deep breathing exercises, mindfulness meditation, or creative expression?

**DO I STRIVE TO LISTEN** to the deeper meaning and emotions words often convey?

**DO I USE MY AWARENESS** of others to help them be in a position to prosper and succeed?

other forms of professional guidance reveal that very few address the topic.

For example, while AICP's Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct calls for planners to "serve the public interest with compassion for the welfare of all people," there is little or no guidance on how to do that, or on dealing with emotions that arise from planning. And while emotion is emerging as a valid topic for planning scholars to consider, this work barely informs resources aimed at practitioners.

Within this context, we present four additional insights, focusing particularly on what psychology, neuroscience, and related fields can tell us.

**1. PLANNERS CAN EMBRACE**, understand, and use the wisdom of their emotions. In the early 1990s, psychologist Daniel Goleman popularized the concept of emotional intelligence (EI). EI—how we monitor and handle ourselves and our relationships—has transformed understandings of intelligence. Proponents of EI argue that we must understand the deep wisdom in our emotions, how emotions

influence our thinking and decision making, and how we can work with our emotions rather than aim to suppress them. Goleman presents five EI domains: knowing one's emotions, managing one's emotions, motivating oneself, recognizing emotions in others, and handling relationships. Of critical importance is that "each of these domains represents a body of habit and response that, with the right effort, can be improved on," consistent with neuroplasticity of the human brain.

**2. PLANNERS WHO UNDERSTAND relationships** as inherently emotional can be more intelligent and effective in their work. Evidence is accumulating that as humans, "we are wired to connect" at a deep biological level. Goleman's formulation of social intelligence pushes us to be "intelligent not just about our relationships but also in them." He describes two key dimensions of social intelligence: social awareness, "a spectrum that runs from instantaneously sensing another's inner state, to understanding feelings and thoughts, to 'getting' complicated social situations," and social facility, a spectrum that "builds on social awareness to allow smooth, effective interactions." Social interactions in planning can involve very difficult emotions because of the deeply entrenched suffering that inequality, racism, sexism, and other systematic failures have created and continue to create in our society.

**3. PLANNERS CAN WORK WITH emotions** to more skillfully and effectively engage with the full spectrum of diversity and difference in our communities, particularly as planners aim to advance social equity and justice. Soon Ang and colleagues introduce the concept of cultural intelligence (CQ), understood as "capability to function and manage effectively in culturally diverse settings." Cultural intelligence is associated with more culturally appropriate judgments and decision making, cultural adaptation, and actual task performance. While there is little about CQ in the planning literature, the concepts of cultural competency

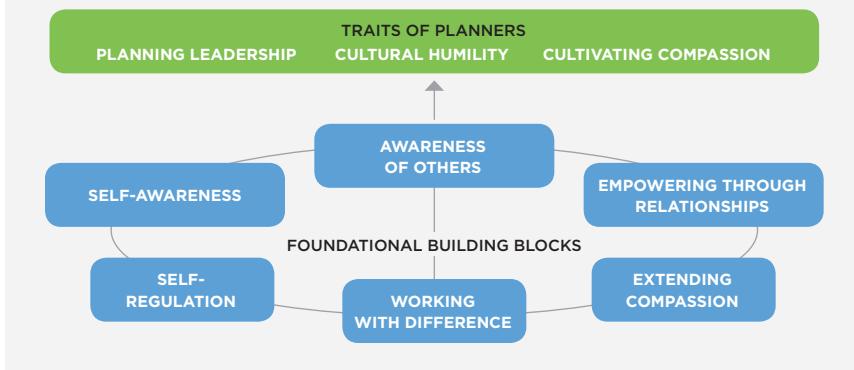
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### A MODEL FOR REIMAGINING PLANNING AS CARING

The six building blocks for this model are interdependent, with each one drawing on and pointing to mutually supporting insights, practices, and tools.



and cultural humility are gaining traction, offering proactive and rational approaches to advancing social equity and justice.

**4. POWER IS RELATIONAL.** Planners may feel empowered when fostering public engagement, even as that power generates cautionary feelings of uneasiness. Power is inherent in every human relationship and interaction, whether or not we choose to acknowledge it. Dacher Keltner and colleagues argue power initially accrues to us through positive emotional actions, such as expressing empathy and gratitude, giving to others, and telling stories that unite us. Wielding power can lead to empathy deficits, self-serving impulsivity, incivility and disgust, however.

Planners who foster emotional, social, and cultural intelligence in themselves and others can intentionally weave stakeholder networks that generate power.

#### Reimagining planning as caring

We draw on these insights to reimagine planning as caring, alongside conceptions of planning as design, analysis, advocacy, communication, and deliberation. We anticipate that planning as caring will require transforming planners' visions of leadership, humbly engaging with difference, and cultivating compassion. We propose six building blocks for planning as caring: 1) self-awareness,

2) self-regulation, 3) awareness of others, 4) working with difference, 5) empowering through relationships, and 6) extending compassion. These elements are interdependent, each drawing on and pointing to mutually supporting insights, practices, and tools.

Many planners and planning organizations already effectively foster authentic dialogue and collaboration in their communities by harnessing emotional, social, and cultural intelligence. We must bring the emotional dimensions of their stories to the forefront of our educational instruction, practical training, and ongoing evolution as a field.

*Swearingen White is a professor and the director of the School of Public Affairs and Administration at the University of Kansas, where Lyles is an associate professor. Lyles is also the director of KU's Center for Compassionate and Sustainable Communities. "Who Cares? Arnstein's Ladder, the Emotional Paradox of Public Engagement, and (Re)imaging Planning as Caring," (Vol. 85, No. 3) was originally published in the Journal of the American Planning Association. Share your insights with fellow planners in the "Emotions in Planning" session at NPC20.*

Planning (ISSN 0001-2610) is published by the American Planning Association, 205 N. Michigan Ave., Suite 1200, Chicago, IL 60601. APA's membership includes 11 issues annually, plus the Annual Meeting Proceedings. Single issue subscription fee for Planning: Nonmember subscribers pay \$85 a year for 11 issues annually of Planning (\$120 foreign). Periodicals postage paid at Chicago, Illinois, and at additional mailing offices. Planning is a registered trademark. Copyright 2020 by the American Planning Association. Reprint permission must be requested in writing from APA. Postage paid at Chicago, Illinois, and at additional addresses. Planning Subscription Department, American Planning Association, 205 N. Michigan Ave., Suite 1200, Chicago, IL 60601; 312-431-9100. Please supply both old and new addresses. Attn: Canadian Postmaster By Canadian agreement 40033287. Canadian return mail should be addressed to Station A, P.O. Box 54, Windsor, Ontario N9A 6J5.

