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Mind the widening 'theory–practice gap'? The retreat to positivism in planning practice

This article argues that recent times have seen a (re)intensification of positivist decision making in planning practice in England. Ostensibly underpinned by appeals to scientific evidence and 'objective' fact, it seems this is resulting in an increased difficulty in operationalising subjective forms of knowledge. This it is argued has led to a widening theory–practice gap which has serious consequences for participatory democracy. The paper uses planning philosophy (theories of knowledge) as an analytical framework with which to examine these developments from both a theoretical and practice perspective. The latter is supported by insights from public and private sector planners, gathered during semi-structured interviews in 2021. Our findings suggest that a better philosophical understanding of the world within which planning operates can meaningfully inform both theory and practice and help planners to make sense of and navigate the trends described above.

Keywords: positivism, epistemology, knowledge claims, evidence, theory–practice gap.

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Introduction

This article argues that there has been a (re)intensification of positivist decision-making in planning practice in England which has increased the difficulty of operationalising subjective forms of knowledge in planning practice. Building on previous research which observed a growing struggle to emplace subjective notions of heritage value in English conservation planning practice (xxx, 2016), [AQ1] we present updated empirical evidence that shows that this observation is not just confined to the specific field of conservation planning. We observe an increased reliance on scientific – or perhaps more properly 'scientistic' – evidence and objective fact in all areas of planning decision-making, which we argue is a result of recent changes affecting planning practice. This trend towards positivist decision-making has arguably accentuated and widened the theory–practice gap. It, we contend, impedes meaningful public participation in planning processes and prevents 'community empowerment', ostensibly a core principle of the Localism Act (2011) introduced in England just over a decade ago.

Informed by these observations, the paper addresses the following questions: which claims to knowledge are deemed valid in planning practice? What are the underpinning philosophical beliefs dictating planning processes? And what implications does this have for the role of the public in planning? The paper uses epistemology (theories of knowledge) as an analytical framework with which to explore these questions from both a theoretical and practice perspective. Insights gathered from semi-structured interviews conducted with public and private sector planners in 2021 are evaluated using this framework. Our findings suggest that a better philosophical understanding of the world within which planning operates can meaningfully inform both theory and practice and help planners to make sense of and navigate the trends described above. The following section briefly outlines the context within which the concerns this paper addresses are situated and its structure.

Setting the context

Since the 1980s, scholars have observed that planning research does not pay enough attention to epistemology (theories of knowledge), even though planners are repeatedly required to make philosophical judgements about what constitutes valid knowledge and truth (Camhis, 1979; Taylor, 1980). Forty years on, theories of knowledge remain under-researched in the planning context (Allmendinger, 2009). We therefore aim in this paper to build on the existing body of work to bring the role of knowledge once more to the fore. We argue that it is crucial to fully understand the philosophical context within which planners plan, because this has critical implications for what planners believe to be true in a planning encounter, and how decisions about society and space are made. We hope to illustrate in this paper that examining the epistemological underpinning of planning settings can also better elucidate recent trends in planning practice. To do this, we outline the historical evolution of planning theory and examine recent substantive changes in planning practice in England through the lens of epistemology (theories of knowledge). Our paper is organised into three parts. The first provides an overview of key epistemological theories of knowledge and traces major developments in planning theory from the rational model(s) of planning which dominated mid-twentieth-century planning thought through to postpositivist theories which have emerged in recent decades. The second part draws on insights from documentary reviews, the authors' experiences of planning practice, and semi-structured interviews with public and private sector planners, to examine recent developments in planning practice in England. This reveals a marked shift towards an emphasis and reliance on scientific/objective evidence to inform and 'defend' decision-making. The third part discusses the findings suggesting that after movements towards acceptance of wider definitions of valid knowledge and evidence, and of public participation, in planning theory and (to an extent) in planning practice, a change in the direction of travel can now be observed. Finally, a conclusion reflects on the implications of the paper's findings for planning theory and practice.

Theoretical foundations

Epistemology (theories of knowledge)

Theories of knowledge, also known as epistemological theories, play a critical role in shaping planning theory and influencing how knowledge is perceived, acquired and applied within the field. They provide the foundation for understanding how knowledge is constructed, what constitutes valid knowledge, how it is generated and the methods used to acquire it. As such, they underpin decision-making processes. Theories of knowledge have already been discussed and critiqued extensively in the literature (see for example, Popper, 1972; Forester, 1980, 1999; Faludi, 1986; Habermas, 1984; Hall, 1983; Innes de Neufville, 1983; Healey, 1997; Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger, 1998). Therefore, to understand the context for this paper, only the most influential epistemological theories are set out here before discussing how they are reflected in planning theory.

Rationalist epistemologies prioritise logical analysis and scientific reasoning, such as August Comte's early nineteenth-century formulation of positivism, which underpins the rational-comprehensive planning model, discussed below. On the other hand, constructivist epistemologies emphasise the social and subjective construction of knowledge and the active role of individuals. Key examples of the latter include Edmund Husserl's early twentieth-century phenomenology, and later, critical theory, which can be traced back to the Frankfurt School of critical social theory. Critical theory is most often associated with Jürgen Habermas's ideas, which shaped communicative planning theory, but it also brought other theorists into the realm of planning theory, such as Foucault and Dewey. This 'communicative turn' (Healey, 1996; Forester, 1999), was motivated, among other factors, by the postmodern criticisms directed at scientific rationalism (Skrimizea et al., 2019). As these new epistemological perspectives emerged, they challenged existing knowledge and paradigms, leading to the development of new planning theories and approaches. The shift from positivist to more constructivist epistemologies influenced the emergence of collaborative and inclusive planning models, which impacted significantly on the evolution of planning

theory, as explained below.

Successive shifts in planning theory

Early planning theories

The theoretical response to evolving epistemological perspectives is considered extensively in the planning theory literature (see for example, the typologies developed by Yiftachel, 1989, 108 or Allmendinger, 2002a, 94; Allmendinger 2009). The most significant theoretical shifts necessary to situate this paper are now discussed.

Patrick Geddes, in developing the survey-analysis-plan approach to planning, is often cited as having established the rational-comprehensive planning model (Hall, 1992; Lane, 2005). This model, which dominated the mid-twentieth century, aspired to scientific objectivity and was underpinned by a positivist epistemology leading to an emphasis on measurement and the testing of planning options and outcomes. It gave credibility to quantifiable data, whilst discouraging the study of meanings, intentions and values (Hall, 1992; Allmendinger, 2009). The model was guided by the idea that planning should 'proceed somewhat like science' and 'use logic and focus on the measurable and on what could be verified through hypothesis testing and data' (Innes and Booher, 2015, 197).

In the late 1950s in the USA and in the 1960s in the United Kingdom, systems or synoptic planning entered the theoretical planning discourse (McLoughlin, 1969; Hall, 1983). Influenced by biological science and the notion of ecosystems, systems planning understood cities to be in a state of flux, and subject to a wide variety of geographical, social, political, economic and cultural dynamics, which interact and influence one another. Consequently, systems planning contended that cities should be understood based on rationality, forecasting and modelling (McLoughlin, 1969), and called for conceptual or mathematical models and quantitative analysis to understand them and anticipate/plan for their change (Hudson, 1979, 389). While such planning theories were clearly embedded in positivist thought, it was also in the context of systems planning that calls for public participation in planning first emerged (Faludi,

1973; Lane, 2005).

Communicative planning theory / collaborative planning

In the 1990s planning theory underwent a sea change, heavily influenced by phenomenology and critical theory, culminating in a significant step away from the rational planning of the 1960s and 1970s. Built on a converging set of ideas: Habermas's (1984) notion of communicative rationality, Dryzek's (1990) concept of discursive democracy, and Giddens's (1994) notion of dialogic democracy, planning theory turned towards acknowledging the socially constructed nature of knowledge and power relations. Influenced by phenomenology and critical theory, communicative planning theory recognised diverse perspectives and inclusive argumentation. It focused on language-based transactions and two-way dialogue, aiming for collaborative decision making and the diffusion of power differences among participants (Habermas, 1984; Healey, 2006).

These ideas were the broad basis for collaborative planning theory, most associated with Patsy Healey (1996; 1997; 1999; 2003; 2006). The focus of collaborative planning on embracing the heterogeneity of knowledge (Healey, 2006; Brand and Gaffikin, 2007), concentrates on the 'common' good in the search for 'consensus' (Hillier, 2003; Bond, 2011). The communicative turn signalled a clear direction of travel, where all forms of argumentation are to be heard. It recognised the limitations of the rational comprehensive planning model, and of positivism, rejected the notion of a 'unitary public interest' and called for 'a broader view of evidence', 'knowledge', argumentation and 'information in planning' (Forester, 1989; [AQ2] Healey, 1997; Flyvbjerg, 1998; Krizek et al., 2009, 465). Despite these features of the communicative turn and its aspirations to foster more deliberative and inclusive forms of democracy, it also has its critics. Some argue that the collaborative search for consensus around planning and other policy agendas is misguided and naïve about the distorting effects of power on communication in societies. As a result, it may in practice actually depoliticise what should be agonistic (i.e. authentically conflictual) debates around controversial policy agendas and issues in planning and other fields (Allmendinger, 2017; Mouffe, 2005).

Progress in planning theory, and the kinds of debates outlined above, however, do

not necessarily trickle into planning practice. While these new ways of understanding may have somewhat increased the weight given to public input in planning, even during the collaborative/communicative planning heyday of the 1990s/early 2000s it is questionable whether this form of input was ever truly recognised as 'knowledge'. As discussed below more recently, however, there have been movements that have sought to broaden the approach to planning knowledge more explicitly, building on these origins, yet embracing more nuanced and interdisciplinary perspectives, as well as the complexities and uncertainties inherent in urban contexts (Innes and Booher, 2010; Rydin, 2021; Skrimizea et al., 2019).

Planning under complexity

Recent contributions to the field revisit the planning theories of the past through the lens of complexity science, seeking new perspectives on evidence and practice. Rydin's (2021) work, for example, on relational approaches, re-examines the role of rationality in planning, recognises its importance in decision-making processes, but simultaneously highlights the need to understand complexity and the non-linear responses that can result from planning interventions. Unpredictability and uncertainty are considered integral to planning, understood as part of complex systems (Skrimizea et al., 2019). Seeing planning in this way challenges the conventional view of rational and systems planning and the more simplistic cause-effect model, but also questions whether collaborative planning alone can achieve the desired planning outcomes. While the focus on public deliberations underpinned by fairness and inclusion can achieve short-term success, the overall substantive success of this approach in delivering improved planning outcomes has been questioned (Innes and Booher, 2015; Zellner and Campbell, 2015).

De Roo's (2007; 2012) complexity-informed view of planning knowledge and evidence organises planning theories into their 'technical' or 'communicative' rationales. These are considered as two ends of planning theory's evolution: at one end referring to 'the so-called closed systems, high degree of certainty and an objectoriented perspective based on facts', while the other end 'refers to very complex or

chaotic systems, high degree of uncertainty and an inter-subjective perspective based on values' (Skrimizea et al., 2019, 133). Under what Skrimizea et al. (2019) refer to as the 'complexity turn', the argument is made that a new rationale designed to address complex planning problems (which are characterised by both uncertainty and known behavioural patterns) should be positioned in a dynamic space that draws from both ends of the spectrum. In response to this, the proposed 'adaptive rationale' combines both technical 'facts' and communicative 'values' and considers them in a dialectic relationship within its epistemology. The concept of a 'dialectic relationship' is important as it signifies an equitable and issue-oriented connection between the two, where they mutually inform and guide planning mechanisms and decision-making. Despite their inherent limitations, the proposed adaptive rationale strives for maximum effectiveness, fostering new debates within planning theory.

Recent developments in planning practice in England

The main trends and movements in town planning theory, summarised above, frame the arguments we make in the rest of this paper – namely that rather than progress towards 'communicative' or 'adaptive' rationales, there is currently a form of regression in planning practice towards earlier epistemological perspectives (the so-called 'technical' rationale). This we posit represents a widening theory–practice gap. The reason why this is important we hope will become clear later, when explored in the context of implications for planning practice. Our account is based on a policy and literature review, our own experiences working in practice, and is further enriched by the views of planning professionals, using qualitative data extracted from the transcripts of online interviews conducted in 2021. The planning professionals interviewed are anonymised, at their own request, however they were agreeable to their comments being associated with their role and their organisation 'type', i.e. local authority, planning consultant, housebuilder. Seventeen planning professionals participated (nine from local authorities, five planning consultants and three planners working for national housebuilders). The participants were skewed towards Northern England (for practical reasons such as existing connections); however, the Midlands and the South of England were also represented. The comments of these public and

private sector professionals supplement our assessment, and support the findings of previous work, which exposed similar issues in the narrower field of heritage conservation planning (Ludwig, 2016). They strengthen the case that planning practice has entered a phase of epistemological regression, characterised by a retreat towards positivist working practices. They also help us to understand why this is problematic.

Planning reform: localism, streamlining planning and a presumption in favour of development

While planning theory was evolving, major policy and planning shifts were also taking place in planning practice in England. Obliged to follow government guidance and laws, planning practice is regularly affected by periods of political and other macroenvironmental external changes. Changes in government and political ideologies, for example, are often accompanied by a refocused policy emphasis and the establishment of corresponding planning laws/policies/amendments. In the 1990s and 2000s, for example, alongside a wider objective to tackle social inclusion in England, New Labour governments (1997–2010) emphasised community involvement in planning, requiring that all local authorities produce a Statement of Community Involvement (SCI), which was formalised in the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act of 2004. SCIs would explain to the public who will be involved in all stages of plan preparation and how. While on the surface the introduction of the SCI sent a clear signal that planning was no longer confined to those with technical expertise, and was opening up to wider public participation, the type of participation listed in the SCI was often little more than a tokenistic gesture (such as leaflets, a poster or exhibition in the local library for example).

The New Labour governments were also associated with 'new regionalism' (Pugalis and Townsend, 2012) whereas by contrast, the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government (2010–2015) and subsequent Conservative administrations rejected regional planning and promoted 'localism' (the 'Big Society'), through rhetoric and the establishment of the Localism Act (2011). The Coalition government maintained that 'localism' offered real community empowerment (Haughton and Allmendinger,

2013) and promoted devolved governance (Bentley and Pugalis, 2013) [AQ3] and the Localism Act made it possible for Neighbourhood Plans (NP) to be developed by communities. The stated aim of these measures was to 'promote decentralisation, democratic engagement, and […] end the era of top-down government by giving new powers to local councils, communities, neighbourhoods and individuals' (HM Government, 2010, 11). This led to substantive organisational, political and procedural change in the planning system.

Another agenda promoted in political rhetoric and through successive reforms by different governments since the 1970s in England is that of 'streamlining' planning policy and the development control/management process (Sykes and Sturzaker, 2023). From the 1990s onwards, Planning Policy Guidance (PPG) notes had been topic-based statements of the government's national policy and principles with which local planning decisions and plans had to align. Under the provisions of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004, these were gradually phased out and replaced with Planning Policy Statements (PPS). In 2012, two years after a change of government and one year after the adoption of the Localism Act, PPSs were replaced by one consolidated National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). Through this the government aimed to streamline and simplify the planning process, and the document has since been further amended (in 2018, 2019 and 2021). The NPPF consolidated the previous planning policy documents removing a lot of the detail provided in the PPGs and PPSs, and instead provided this in a periodically updated accompanying suite of PPG. The NPPF includes an overarching 'presumption in favour of sustainable development' which implies that planning permission should generally be granted unless 'any adverse impacts of doing so would significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits' (NPPF, 2021, [AQ4] paragraph 11, italics added). This default position tends to shift the onus to local authorities to present evidence to demonstrate that harm outweighs benefits (rather than vice versa), arguably substantially restricting the former's decision-making freedom and flexibility in practice.

The policy changes did not just affect national level planning policy. The previous

Core Strategies, part of the Local Development Framework (LDF) introduced under the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004, were to be replaced by Local Plans (Local Development Plans). While Core Strategies provided a strategic framework, Local Plans are supposed to offer more detailed and site-specific policies, including specific allocations for housing and other land uses. The change from Core Strategies to Local Plans was also part of the political rhetoric around empowering local authorities and communities to have a greater say in shaping the future development of their areas, while still adhering to national planning policies and objectives outlined in the NPPF. The supposed shift this represented towards a more localised and community focused approach, however, faced challenges due to the complex and time-consuming process required to produce a Local Plan. Reasons cited for this include the plethora of planning reforms associated with the Localism Act (2011), such as the requirement to get to grips with the abolition of regional planning policy and its replacement measure the new 'duty to cooperate' with neighbouring planning authorities, in addition to the demand to collect a growing number of comprehensive and robust evidence-based studies (Yildiz, 2013). The plan making process is challenging to navigate, leading to delays in plan preparation and adoption. In 2021 figures suggested that only 50 per cent of local authorities had an up-to-date plan in place (UK Parliament, 2021).

By 2023 it was reported that only around 40 per cent of local authorities had a plan adopted within the past five years (DLUHC, 2022; Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee, 2023). According to the NPPF, 'where there are no relevant [local] development plan policies, or the policies which are most important for determining the application are out-of-date' then paragraph 11 of the NPPF is triggered, meaning that the NPPF becomes the key policy document guiding decision making (NPPF, 2021, 6). This provides, what a planning consultant described as 'a tilted balance' in favour of granting planning permission (in line with the NPPF's presumption in favour of sustainable development), as shown in the extracts below:

> *I have to admit that there is a tilted balance in favour of granting planning permission at the moment and this does represent an opportunity for speculative applications.*

(planning consultant, 2021)

Based on the current policy framework, I have clients who believe now is their chance to get their permission. (planning consultant, 2021)

The current situation is not ideal because it doesn't provide clarity or real security, but the NPPF is a good starting point and local authorities are under pressure, feeling rattled, want to avoid appeals, so all in all, we probably have the best chance in years to secure that permission. (housebuilder, 2021)

The second contextual issue creating a restrictive environment for planners and planning in deploying wider forms of knowledge and experience is the powerful political rhetoric that accompanies the operation and proposed reforms of the planning system (Sykes and Sturzaker, 2023).

Political rhetoric: a housing shortage?

The last decade has been dominated by a widely accepted national narrative about a housing shortage in England. The housing shortage continues to make headlines, particularly fuelled by research in 2018 which highlighted a backlog of 3.91 million homes, meaning 340,000 new homes need to be built in England each year until 2031 (Local Government Association, 2018). The planning system is repeatedly held responsible, most recently with the recent past prime minister Boris Johnson blaming slow housebuilding rates in England on environmental protections for rare newts (UK Parliament, 2022, 70). To criticise the planning system is nothing new – there is a long history of 'planning-bashing' in England (Sykes and Sturzaker, 2020; 2023), but the narrative has subtly changed, recently being linked to the visibly increasing levels of homelessness in England (Booth, 2020). The ensuing discourse has at its extreme, been used as a reason to justify radical deregulation of development and to call for more housing development at any cost. Prior to her fleeting tenure as UK prime minister in 2022, Liz Truss, for example, had referred to a 'top-down, Whitehallinspired Stalinist' approach to housing targets (Malnick, 2022).

What is often omitted from the rhetoric is reference to the uneven spatial distribution

of the housing problem, which certainly affects some areas of the country, but

not all equally, and secondly, the fact that in many cases local authorities are in fact

approving more planning applications than in previous years, but the sites are not

being developed; in 2018, for example, it was reported that over 400,000 homes with

planning permission had still not been built (Local Government Association, 2018)).

The political rhetoric, together with the lack of an up-to-date Local Plan in many

places has boosted developer confidence. It has led to a situation where poorer quality

planning applications are being pushed through the system and if such applications

are rejected, the developer is more likely to appeal against the decision, potentially

incurring high costs for local authorities if the appeal is successful. Indeed, around a

third of planning cases that go to appeal are being overturned (UK Parliament, 2021).

[AQ6] Such costs are hard to bear, particularly since the last decade has been marked

by austerity and characterised by local government funding cuts (Ludwig and Ludwig,

2014). Instead of a plan-led system, planners are currently experiencing 'planning-byappeal',

as expressed by local authority planning officers below:

> *The problem is the planning policy vacuum caused by the radical, and in my opinion*
>
> *irresponsible approach taken by the government to the planning reforms. All of our*
>
> *previous plans and policies are considered out-of-date and can no longer be taken into*
>
> *account. Any refused application now just goes straight to appeal […] with the constant*
>
> *threat of further planning reform and constant threat of appeal, we are under even*
>
> *more pressure to grant permission and justify everything as scientifically as possible.*
> (local authority principal planner, 2021)

> *The council doesn't have the money [to pay costs for appeal]. We need to really try to*
>
> *avoid such a scenario. We also are the ones who need to stand there and defend our*
>
> *decisions. We need to be 100% sure we have the hard evidence to back our decisions*
>
> *at appeal.* (local authority senior planner, 2021).

It is clear that local authority planners believe the current climate is conducive to increased challenge through the planning appeal process. They also are increasingly concerned about the defensibility of planning decisions, which they seem to believe need to be justified 'as scientifically as possible'. Scientific evidence is defined as 'hard evidence' and appears to be the type of evidence that planners feel most comfortable using when trying to 'defend decisions' at appeal. The emphasis on what constitutes valid evidence is further elaborated on in the following extracts, below.

Evidence for the defence (of planning): what counts?
The focus on 'scientific' evidence was a recurring theme to emerge during the interviews with planning professionals; all cited a need for careful scrutiny of planning decisions to ensure they are defensible. The notion of defensibility was explicitly linked with 'irrefutable evidence' and as the extracts below illustrate, has severe consequences for local communities trying to engage with the planning system:

> *On the one hand, you know, you want to be innovative and inclusive and really give people a voice. On the other hand, you know that when it comes down to it, to really making a decision about a policy or about a planning application, it will not be that voice that stands up in court, it will be the hard, irrefutable evidence.* (local authority, senior planner, 2021)

> *I mean, take housing as an example. We have to produce a housing technical paper using a standardised scientific methodology. We have to produce a housing monitoring report, various needs and viability assessments. These figures are calculated using scientific methodologies and these figures are the only things that really hold any weight at the moment.* (local authority planning officer, 2021)

> *[P]ublic input by nature is subjective. You could try to use it as evidence but then you could imagine somebody hiring a barrister and doing some kind of cage-rattling within the local authority […] so we need to cover our backs unfortunately. You can't argue with the hard facts.* (local authority principal planner, 2021)

The above findings highlight an interesting paradox. The political emphasis on housing delivery ironically seems to have led to a perceived power shift from local authorities to the private sector (developers), rather than the intended devolution of power to local authorities and to communities as reportedly sought through the Localism Act. The observed power shift appears to have increased not only the threat of planning appeal and legal challenge (which both public and private sector planning professionals seem to consider will most likely be determined in favour of development), but consequently, the perceived need to tighten up decision-making.

Data from the interviews conducted suggests that the latter results in local practice in the adoption of a more rigid framework justified by rationality, objective fact and robust, scientific evidence. In other words, this appears to represent an epistemic backward movement towards the pole of positivism. In some ways it is hardly surprising that the importance of scientific evidence and objective fact has arisen at a time of rapid systemic change, where social, political, emotional and cultural upheavals give rise to feelings of uncertainty, distrust, detachment and alienation against which the more reassuring objective, scientifically verifiable evidence is sought out. This epistemic retreat, however, has a number of ironic interlinked consequences. First, it stands in direct contrast to policy and academic calls for community empowerment (HM Government, 2010; Cabinet Office, 2010; Localism Act, 2011). [AQ7] Secondly, it widens the ideological gap between the 'experts' and the 'non-experts' (the former being in a position to defend planning decisions based on technical training and the use of a quantitative evidence base compiled using scientific methodologies). Thirdly, it widens the planning theory–practice gap, discussed in the preceding sections of this paper. The following extracts confirm the negative impact of this epistemic position on the role of the public in current planning practice:

> *Devolved power? Well we as planners feel that we have less power so I don't think the community stands a chance right now […] local opinion is an additional requirement […] but is only really explicitly taken on board if it already aligns with the evidence. On balance, it has very little weight unfortunately. It hasn't always been like this, I have*

been working in planning a long time and I saw headway, change, but this current environment has changed all of that. (local authority principal planner, 2021)

I came into planning with genuine intentions to make it more inclusive… I put a lot of time into this […] but right now what counts, unfortunately, is the hard evidence. We have literally no time either so we need to prioritise. You know, where should we put in most time and effort? We are under the spotlight […] being tested more and more, we need to have undisputable evidence that we can pull out to say, 'there you go, look at those numbers, look at those hard facts!' (local authority senior planner, 2021)

you've got to be careful about the decisions you make and how much you weight it, because it could come back to bite you if something goes to appeal […] especially now there's a focus on delivery and a presumption in favour of development. The power lies with the developers. (local authority principal planner, 2021)

We need to close this policy gap as soon as possible and get the evidence base completed as soon as possible. Once we can pull out the evidence, the hard-scientific facts, then we will be empowered again as planners. Then maybe we can start trying to involve the public again. (local authority planning officer, 2021)

It is important to note here, however, that evidence-based planning is not a new phenomenon (Innes, 2002; Davoudi, 2006; Faludi & Waterhout, 2006). Indeed, evidence has been collected to inform planning since before the planning profession emerged (Krizek et al., 2009). Evidence-based policy is deemed to be a pragmatic approach to decision-making and policy formulation, based on sound reasoning (Campbell, 2002; Davoudi, 2006; Krizek et al., 2009). The type of evidence collected is usually quantitative and can include an array of studies such as economic and statistical modelling, indicators and survey results. These may be prepared in-house by local planning authority staff or subcontracted to specialist consultants with expertise in particular scientific methodologies, such as those used in affordable housing viability studies and strategic flood risk assessments.

Evidence-based forms of policy development can be observed across Europe; the collection of evidence is now a part of the planning process enshrined in English and Dutch law (Faludi and Waterhout, 2006). Meanwhile, the concept of 'evidence-based practice' (EBP) has emerged in the USA (Healy, 2002). While not completely analogous, both EBP and evidence-based policy have both been previously criticised for seeking to present professional decision-making as scientifically rational (Faludi, 2007), as being underpinned by positivist thought (Innes, 2002), and failing to give weight to other forms of knowledge (Böhme, 2002). [AQ8] Healy (2002) also contemplated whether it was being used as a form of inertia and control.

Davoudi (2006) has highlighted several challenges associated with evidence-based policy and planning. Like Rydin (2021) (see previous section of this paper in relation to relational approaches), Davoudi highlighted that the traditional understanding of evidence-based approaches often assumes a linear relationship between evidence and decision-making, where policymakers and planners gather evidence, analyse it, and then make informed decisions. However, she argued that the reality is more complex and nuanced. Many policy problems are characterised by multiple dimensions, uncertainties and varying stakeholder perspectives. This complexity makes it difficult to establish a straightforward relationship between evidence and decision making, as different forms of evidence may lead to conflicting conclusions. Davoudi (2006) also pointed out the limitations of evidence itself. She argued that evidence is not value-neutral but is influenced by social, cultural and political contexts. This introduces subjectivity and potential biases in the selection, interpretation and application of evidence in policy and planning processes. Furthermore, she highlighted the challenge of knowledge utilisation. Even when robust evidence is available, it does not guarantee its uptake and incorporation into policy and planning practices. The utilisation of evidence is contingent upon various factors, including political will, institutional capacity, and the ability of policymakers and planners to interpret and apply it effectively.

As noted earlier, there have also been a number of movements over the past decade or so which have sought to broaden approaches to and understandings and uses of planning knowledge(s). Authors such as Krizek et al. (2009), Rydin et al. (2018) and Tate (2020) have thus examined the role of evidence and knowledge in planning. They have highlighted the complex relationship between producers and users of evidence (Krizek et al., 2009), and have identified a tendency in the area of energy planning (in relation to 'nationally significant infrastructure projects'), to prioritise technical over non-technical evidence, thus reducing the complexity which comes with value judgements (Rydin et al., 2018) in this field of planning. Some of these authors have suggested a need for more critical reflections on the relative merit of different types of planning evidence, in both quantitative and qualitative domains (Rydin, 2021; Tate, 2020) and a more nuanced understanding of evidence-based policy and planning that acknowledges the complexity of decision-making processes, the inherent subjectivity of evidence, and the challenges in translating evidence into action (Davoudi, 2006). Other authors have called for more attention to be paid to the potential for 'co-creation' as a means of bringing more subjective forms of knowledge to the fore, for example, exploring 'possibilities for planners to listen and respond to arts-based expressions, in order to integrate a broader range of understandings and knowledge into plans for the city of the future' (Carpenter and Horvath, 2022, 313).

While evidence-gathering has a very useful role to play in plan and policymaking, the passages above emphasise that it is crucial to critically question what comprises 'evidence' in practical decision-making (Faludi and Waterhout, 2006, 7). How, for example, do notions of 'evidence' relate to claims to knowledge and what is deemed legitimate and valid within the legal apparatus of planning and within planning discourse? The answers to such questions, we have shown, have serious implications for both space (informing the outcomes of development), as well as society (participatory planning).

We now draw together the main insights from the findings and discussions above and set out the implications for planning theory and practice.

Discussion

Unpacking the underlying theories of knowledge operating in planning practice is useful because an appreciation of different epistemologies helps us in appreciating the extent to which post-positivist theories are infiltrating practice and what constitutes valid evidence, truth and legitimate claims to knowledge in current practice.

Our brief review of developments in philosophy, theory and practice highlights the inextricable link between them and that they should not be examined in isolation. While planning theory has progressed into a period of post-positivism as set out earlier in this paper, the theory–practice gap appears to be widening. It is, however, important to make clear that progress in planning theory does not imply a clear linear development, where new theories simply replace old ones, and in fact in reality theories often coexist, influencing and competing with each other. As noted by (Allmendinger, 2002b, xii):

> what does not happen in planning is the total replacement of one school of theory with another. One may become dominant academically and politically, but the result is a more crowded landscape.

Contemporary planning practices may thus draw from multiple perspectives. That said, over recent decades, planning practice had become more pluralistic and engaged with a wider range of epistemological theories, whilst holding onto a 'core' centred on the rational-comprehensive school and the Comptian positivism. While arguably not yet transformative, there were signs that the communicative planning theories – underpinned by phenomenology, critical theory and Habermasian ideas – were influencing planning processes. This is, for example, evident in the policy developments since the 1990s such as the introduction of SCIs, the rhetoric surrounding localism and the founding of legally binding NPs, as well as within the planning professionals' perspectives reported above. It seems that these inroads made into planning practice, however, have been truncated in England by current upheavals in policy, the resultant uncertainty and a political climate often hostile to planning. Planning professionals

agree that, 'it hasn't always been like this' and that they, 'saw headway' and 'change', but that the current environment in which they work, 'has changed all of that' (local authority principal planner, 2021).

It is evident that planning practice in England is currently experiencing substantive organisational, political and procedural change and the effects of this turbulence permeate planning processes and have shaken the underpinning philosophical foundations upon which planning is built. Instead of a methodological approach to planning that rests on epistemic phenomenology or critical theory (the basis for many postpositivist planning theories) or complexity theory and the adaptive rationale, which seeks to merge the technical 'facts' with the communicative 'values' in a 'dialectic relationship', practice shows that the pendulum is instead currently swinging back towards the pole of positivism, leaving a critical gap between 'reality' in society, and practice, norms and culture in local authorities. This movement seems well represented by aspects of the Planning White Paper published in 2020 (MHCLG, 2020), for example, in its emphasis on 'Property Tech' (or PropTech for the initiated). The White Paper thus argued that:

> *A reformed system that is based upon data, rather than documents* will help to provide the data that innovators and entrepreneurs, including the burgeoning PropTech sector, need to build new technology to help improve citizen engagement and planning processes. (MHCLG, 2020, 25, added emphases) [AQ9]

This quote seems to echo the findings presented earlier in this paper. In particular the reference to a planning system 'based on data, rather than documents' is revealing as it suggests that documents and the kinds of information they convey – e.g. qualitative reflection and discussion of values to be served by planning etc. – would not be seen as 'data' (so as valid 'evidence' to support planning). The claim that a planning system that is 'based on data' will 'help to provide the data' needed by 'innovators and entrepreneurs' including in the PropTech sector to 'help improve citizen engagement and planning processes' is also revealing. Leaving aside the rather circular line of reasoning – a system based on data will provide data – there is an unexplored

assumption that more 'data not documents' and support from new technologies ('PropTech') will improve citizen engagement and planning processes. Chapman et al. (2020, 310), sound a more cautious note on this commenting that:

> The vision that property technology sells – of a frictionless, automated regime for granting development consents – fundamentally overlooks the value of both skilled professional judgement and democratic debate in determining where the public interest lies in the use and development of land.

It is interesting to relate the issues discussed above to a comment from one of the interviewees interviewed for this paper, that '[o]nce we can pull out the evidence, the hard-scientific facts, then we will be empowered again as planners. Then maybe we can start trying to involve the public again' (local authority planning officer, 2021). The reasoning seems to be that, once something has been justified by the 'positivist' 'scientific' evidence, input from other sources might then be sought and considered. This implies a clear sequencing and hierarchisation in the prioritisation of different forms of knowledge.

Implications for planning theory and practice

The preceding sections have highlighted and explored a number of themes around the evolution of the epistemic and theoretical bases of the planning discipline in its academic and practice manifestations. They have argued that planning practice is currently being drawn back into prioritising positivistic forms of knowledge and evidence above other ways of knowing, leaving critical gaps between 'reality' in society and academic thought on one side, and practice, norms and culture in local authorities. But is this problematic? The planning theory literature contains longstanding concern about the theory–planning gap, but these concerns have been accompanied by questions: does the gap even exist? Does it matter? (Alexander, 1997). Is there something wrong with planning theory? (Lord, 2014). What about 'theory less planning'? (Talvitie, 2009). Meanwhile, the post-positivist landscape of planning theory can be seen to rebuff such reservations (Allmendinger, 2009). Set against the backdrop of such debates our focus here has been on the epistemological foundations

upon which both theory and practice are built. Returning to Alexander's (1997, 3) question about whether the theory–practice gap matters, we would argue that – contrary to the claims being advanced in some areas – the re-intensification of positivist thought in planning practice outlined above has the potential to hinder, rather than promote, participatory democracy in planning practice.

Whilst society in England has been promised social inclusion under some governments and community empowerment under others, the evidence presented here suggests that trends and changes are afoot in planning that conversely risk further marginalising and excluding already underrepresented groups in society, leading to processes of homogenisation, rationalisation and standardisation. Meanwhile, the latest legislative proposals for planning reform in England contained in the so-called Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill (2022) appear to simultaneously seek to encourage more localism through a simplified form of NP to be called Neighbourhood Priorities Statements, whilst introducing new National Development Management Policies (NDMPs) which will have primacy over local development plans in the event policies are in conflict. The 'scope of NDMPs and the process by which they can be determined (and amended) is almost totally unconstrained by the Bill' and 'could result in a significant expansion of central government influence over local planning decisions' (Pritchard, 2022, 244). [AQ10] For Pritchard (2022, 355) [AQ11] 'in the final analysis' the Bill 'can be seen as a step away from the role of local democracy in planning'. Related to the concerns of this paper, the introduction of more powerful national level planning policies raises questions about 'how the government will arrive at the NDMPs'; 'public consultation and the ability of the government of the day to change them as and when they see fit' (Roberts, 2022, 254); and the kinds of knowledge and evidence that will inform them. Given the wider rhetoric accompanying the planning reforms it is plausible that the NDMPs might become another vehicle for the re-intensification of positivist thought in planning practice. The Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) has noted how '[e] xtensive public consultation has been critical to the success of similar policies in other jurisdictions' and called for the introduction of 'strong standards of public consultation and parliamentary scrutiny' around NDMPs (RTPI, 2023; see also Sykes et al., 2023).

On a wider front looking beyond the English context, such epistemological regression risks contributing to social and spatial inequalities and does nothing to facilitate social integration in global pluralistic societies. In reflecting on the UN's New Urban Agenda (NUA) and the planning models it contains, for example, Garschagen and Porter (2018, 119) posit that:

> the tools suggested in the NUA are based on techno-managerial approaches and modernization paradigms such as smart cities or indicator-based management which, in principle, have been around for a long time, but have proven to be ineffective in shifting urban development onto more sustainable pathways, especially in the developing world.

Aside from the practical risks of disappointing planning outcomes which may result from cleaving too narrowly to positivist epistemologies and their associated planning techniques, neglect of the philosophical understanding of the world within which planning operates risks creating a growing pool of citizens that feel 'left-behind' and let down by the system (the 'experts')[1], eliminating trust and rapport, and inciting has social exclusion, unrest, hate and even the rise of anti-system voting, as seen in recent years (Rodríguez-Pose, 2020).

Returning to England, to enable community empowerment, the planning system needs to find ways to 'rationalise' and 'reify' subjectivity and to recognise the 'values' of the communicative rationale as valid 'knowledge'. To enable participatory democracy that is based on inclusive deliberation, the heterogeneity of knowledge needs to be acknowledged, embraced, and emplaced to allow citizens to influence outcomes (Bond, 2011). At the same time, the planning system must enable investigative processes

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[1] Despite presiding in recent years over the trends in planning described in this paper, the present (at the time of writing) Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities in England, Michael Gove, previously sought to exploit such sentiment for political advantage, opining, for example, during the UK's EU Referendum campaign in 2016 that 'people in this country have had enough of experts' (cited in Mance, 2016).

that are fair, realistic and defensible in planning law. Here the planning inspectorate certainly has an influential role through the establishment of case law.

Can the trends described above be reversed and reconciled? The account presented here suggests that planners need to have more support and guidance to prepare and adopt their local plans in a timely fashion. The policy vacuum should not translate into a 'free pass' or automatic planning permission and appeals should not be a fait accompli. Most urgently, attention needs to turn to the use of evidence in planning and in particular a dialogue needs to take place about the philosophical theories of knowledge guiding planning practice. What forms of argumentation and claims to knowledge are relevant and hold weight in planning decision-making? Is community empowerment philosophically possible?

Echoing some of the themes and questions above, Tate (2020) calls specifically for more research on managing evidence in planning in the hope that this might increase confidence in planning decision-making. Relatedly, there is a need to reflect on the role technology and digitalisation play in planning delivering and legitimating what counts as evidence in planning processes. Chapman et al. (2020, 310–11), for example, argue that:

> If, as seems likely, technology is going to play an increasingly central role in the future planning of our towns and cities, there is a need for critical debate about its implications, the way it is developed, and how it is controlled.

This is not to say that technology and digitalisation cannot potentially play a positive role in delivering good planning processes and outcomes. As noted by the report of the RTPI's Digital Task for Planning 'data and new technologies can help us achieve […] goals in a way that was not possible before the digital age'. However, they also caution that 'it is essential to ensure that the approach does not become a digitised technocratic process' (Batty et al., 2022, 4). To avoid this there is a need for more research about how evidence is weighted and prioritised in planning, and an increased awareness of planning philosophy and theories of knowledge is essential

to inform such future research. To be clear this is not an invitation to downplay the importance of positivist insights in planning. As the philosopher and planning theorist Nigel Taylor (1998, 165) notes: 'The employment of reason in planning, aided by the best possible scientific understanding of the world we are seeking to plan, remains as relevant and important now as it has ever been' (arguably more so today with the climate and biodiversity crises the present world is facing). Our argument is rather that in the quest for planning 'reason', there is a need to foster a recognition that bringing ever more 'objective evidence' to the planning table will not in itself necessarily deliver the planning outcomes we want and give us the planning society needs, if underlying epistemological and theoretical issues are not addressed.

Conclusion

Through the lens of philosophical theories of knowledge (epistemology), this article has traced key turning points in planning theory and practice. It has outlined the positivist approaches of the rational-comprehensive school of thought through to more recent post- positivist positions. It has presented original empirical data from current planning practice which highlight two key trends in English planning – firstly, a (re)intensification of positivist decision-making in planning practice, and subsequently, an increased difficulty in operationalising subjective forms of knowledge in planning practice. We have made the case that this regression is widening the theory–practice gap and that this is problematic, particularly in the light of oft-stated aspirations to advance participatory democracy at the local level. The significance of the theory–practice gap in planning has been much debated, but our findings suggest that trends in the field mean it is only likely to grow. To close, we wish to underline that the positivist resurgence may also be merely episodic, representing a 'hiccup' in planning practice. Such backward movements, however, warrant explicit acknowledgement and attention. We hope that in presenting our findings, a better philosophical understanding of the world within which planning operates can enjoy a renewed focus (Taylor, 1980), offering the possibility of gaining a better understanding of both planning theory and practice.

Acknowledgements

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