

HISTORY

OF SOCIAL WORK

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FIGURE 1 French Student Poster. In English, I participate; you participate; he participates; we participate; you participate ... They profit.

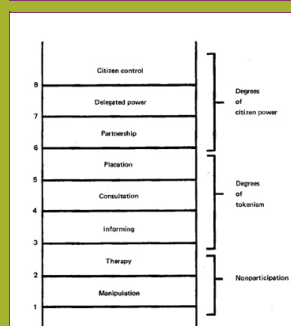


FIGURE 2 Eight Rungs on a Ladder of Citizen Participation



1969 Sherry Arnstein Ladder of participation



You don't have to be a social worker to have a significant impact on social work practice across the world. Neither do you have to write lengthy books to make a lasting impression. That is illustrated by Sherry Arnstein who is part of social works body of knowledge thanks to an article from 1969 not even ten pages long.

Although Sherry Arnstein briefly worked as a social worker in San Francisco, she originally studied physical education. She also finished her career in health, for nearly a decade being executive director of the American association of colleges of osteopathic medicine (an alternative medicine). Important for social work is the time she worked for the US department of health, education and welfare in the 1960s. In 1969, she published the article for which she is still remembered and respected: *A ladder of citizen participation*. Sherry Arnstein died in 1997.

Her article was written at the time she worked as director of community development studies for *The Commons*, a non-profit research institute. It builds heavily on her earlier experience as chief advisor on citizen participation for the US department of housing and urban development. This happened during the presidency of Lyndon Johnson and was influenced by his Model Cities program.

Arnstein aimed to describe a typology of citizen participation and aimed it to be provocative. There was too much rhetoric around about citizen participation, too many misleading euphemisms. As a starter, she clearly equaled citizen participation to citizen power: if participation didn't result in a shifting power balance between the haves and have-nots, it was no real participation. And that, Sherry Arnstein stated, was what had been happening in most of the existing initiatives in the US. That could do for being provocative!

The article continues to describe a ladder of participation with eight rungs, each higher rung representing a larger extent of citizens power. To make here point about symbolic rather than substantial citizen participation even more clearer, the two lowest rungs on the ladder (manipulation and therapy) were together labeled nonparticipation. Even the next three rungs (informing, consultation and placation) were not about real participation, and therefore labeled degrees of tokenism. It's only the two highest rungs of the ladder (delegated power and citizen control) that were 'the real thing' and represented degrees of citizen power.

In the decades since Arnstein's publication, social sciences have highlighted time and again the problematic nonparticipation of citizens in democratic processes. Keystone here is the work of Sidney Verba and Norman Nie. From this and similar studies, it becomes clear that low participation is not only a problem for those individual citizens who are not participating, but also problematic for society.

Arnsteins article originally appeared in the *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* but has been reprinted and translated many times. There are few publications on citizens participation who do not make reference to her article. This not only resulted in many graphical enhancements of the original figure, but also suggestions for changes and improvements. One example is Roger Hart's ladder of youth participation, published in 1997 for UNICEF.

Read more

- Arnstein, S. R. (1969), *A ladder of citizen participation*, Journal of the American Institute of Planners 35(4), 216-224.
- Arnstein, S. R. (1975), *A working model for public participation*, Public Administration Review, 35(1), 70-73.

Additional information

- Hart, R. (1997), *Children's participation: the theory and practice of involving young citizens in community development and*

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See www.historyofsocialwork.org

The history of social work project is foremost a website.

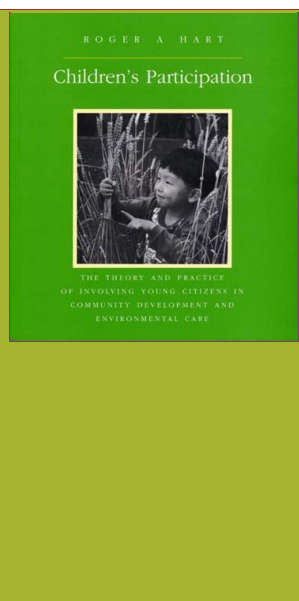
This website is continuously being updated and expanded. Please make sure you visit us for the latest version of the information in this file.



This initiative also exists in Dutch, where it covers the history of social work in the Netherlands, in Flanders, and internationally.

See www.canonsociaalwerk.eu

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[environmental care](#). London: Earthscan Publications

- [Verba, S., & Nie, N. \(1972\), *Participation in America: political democracy and social equality*](#). New York: Harper and Row

Links

- [Wikipedia on participation](#)

Study tasks

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