

Fidelity to Plurality? Grounding Deliberative Integrity

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This research note draws on our emerging conceptualization, research and conversations about deliberative integrity and has not been peer-reviewed. For up to date information on the deliberative integrity project, visit www.deliberativeintegrityproject.org

Fidelity to Plurality? Grounding Deliberative Integrity.

Problem

The concept of deliberative integrity needs to be developed as a conversation between normative theory and deliberative practice. If we begin from the perspective of normative theory in isolation, we risk remaining detached from the political realities that shape the practice of deliberative mini-publics.

Purpose

This research note considers how we can ground our understanding of deliberative integrity in the plurality of understandings and practices found in the field, whilst retaining normative principles.

Approach

This research note takes a critical reflective approach to our own work on conceptualising deliberative integrity. It problematises an overreliance on normative theory and argues for a grounded approach to conceptualising deliberative integrity. To do this we draw on existing literature as well as insights from interviews with practitioners and scholars working on mini-publics.

Findings

Normative theorising should be combined and integrated with empirical and practical insights on deliberative integrity from across the field. This will help us to ensure that our conceptualisation takes into account the plurality of understandings of deliberative mini-publics that exist across different groups and contexts.

Value

These preliminary thoughts help to ground our understanding of deliberative integrity in grounded normative theory, an approach that recognises the importance of integrating both theory and practice based insights during conceptualisation.

Introduction

One of our first explorations into conceptualising deliberative integrity was engaging with the literature on moral and political theory to make sense of how the concept of integrity has been theorised. As [John Dryzek explains](#), integrity is often portrayed as an attribute of individuals. Nili defines integrity as ‘fidelity to one’s identity-grounding commitments or projects’ (2019: 4), which should not be sacrificed for the sake of material gain or expediency.

Since our project does not aim to assess the integrity of individuals behind these deliberative processes, but rather the processes themselves, one possibility is to tweak Nili’s definition. Dryzek suggests that we could change the term ‘identity grounding’ where identity is an attribute of an individual, and replace it to ‘deep moral commitments,’ where these moral commitments of the process are located in the basic ideals of deliberative democracy.

Therefore, from a normative standpoint, we could provisionally define a deliberative mini-public to possess deliberative integrity when ***‘it encourages or allows for fidelity to deliberative commitments which should not be sacrificed for the sake of material gain or expediency (and accumulation of political power?)*** Deliberative commitments in this case would be the basic ideals of deliberative democracy. However, if we break down this definition and the implications of applying it in practice, there are a number of possible challenges. In this research note, we break down these challenges and argue for a grounded understanding of the concept of deliberative integrity that relies not only on normative theorising but also considers the lived experiences of those implementing and studying deliberative mini-publics (DMPs).

Fidelity

Fidelity, referred to in the above provisional definition, is usually conceptualised as keeping promises. If we think about fidelity as keeping promises to deliberative commitments in practice, this could rely on prior agreements to these deliberative commitments and the intention to uphold them. In reality, *intention* is very difficult to assess empirically, and this raises the distinction between honest mistakes and intentional malpractice in deliberative processes. We would then need to consider how that could be assessed in practice.

Is it possible that fidelity could be assessed without relying on knowledge of intention? When we looked into fidelity in empirical social science, we found some possible insights. Fidelity is used as a concept to evaluate educational curricula, for example, where

“Fidelity of implementation is traditionally defined as the determination of how well an intervention is implemented in comparison with the original program design during an efficacy and/or effectiveness study” (O’Connell 2008: 33)

In this field, fidelity is essentially the extent to which a curriculum matches up to its original intentions – which is very close to our provisional definition of integrity, and the notion of fidelity as keeping promises. O’Connell also ties fidelity to outcomes, the assumption being that high fidelity improves outcomes. However, she also notes that in practice, fidelity of implementation is difficult to establish due to variation across contexts and adaptation of ideals to fit local needs (2008: 34). This challenge also holds for the implementation of deliberative mini-publics, where designs vary widely, as do political and cultural contexts, before we even get to the fundamental point that the role and function of DMPs in broader political systems is contested (Parry and Curato 2022).

So, whilst we could assess fidelity by examining the extent to which a mini-public lives up to the ethical principles of deliberative democracy, this does seem to require that practitioners and commissioners of DMPs give some kind of prior commitment to such ethical principles in the first place. If fidelity is the virtue of keeping promises, one expects that the promise needs to have been made in the first place. Without this promise, it could be difficult to establish when there has been a violation of integrity.

The definition offered above then seems to demand that we answer some unresolved questions in the theory and practice of mini-publics: what are the ethical commitments that we want fidelity to? And relatedly, do we need to have a list of ethical commitments that can be accepted by practitioners, policymakers, scholars and participants – if prior commitment is necessary for fidelity?

Answering the first question requires that we make some claims about the role and function of DMPs. Why? Because many of the ethical threats that DMPs encounter are to do with how the process fits into and is responded to by the broader political system (Parry and Curato 2022). For example, some of our interviewees relate integrity to impact: if a process does not have the expected impact on policy, then its integrity is compromised. Others argue that policy impact is out of the hands of the DMP and is ultimately up to policymakers only. We know that within academic debates, direct impact on policy is only one of many ways in which a DMP can relate to and impact the broader political system (e.g. Curato and Böker 2016; Goodin and Dryzek 2006; McKenzie and Warren 2012; Niemeyer 2014). Here we see that deliberative integrity, and fidelity to ethical commitments, are entangled with related concepts of impact, evaluation and deliberative quality.

Answering the second question – of whether we need a list of ethical commitments that relevant actors will agree on – demands that we consider whether a DMP can have integrity without agreement with or fidelity to ethical commitments. Let's imagine that the objective of a DMP is to overcome a stuck policy problem, and decisionmakers think a mini-public is the most effective way to get over the hump. It is a good quality process, following best practice, but its aim was instrumental, a means to an end. Organisers did not commit to the ethical ideals of deliberative democracy *per se*. What are we interested in assessing? Is it fidelity to the practices implied by the principles, or commitment to the principles that matters? Our intuition is that of course, it is the practices, the implementation, that matters because that removes the need for intention, but in that case, does doing things 'in the spirit of deliberative democracy' matter at all?

Lastly, we have some practical concerns about the wording of our provisional definition. It seems unnecessarily definitive; the range of actors involved in the implementation of DMPs, particularly outside of academics and practitioners, may well have different ethical principles that are the priority when organising a process. As one of our interviewees pointed out,

“...if something has deliberative integrity, it is in some way, going to behold somebody who's got power, it's going to constrain them in some way...And so, why would they let themselves be constrained by it?”

We want people in deliberative practice and policy communities to use our work from the deliberative integrity project, and to see the value it could bring to the field. We thus feel concerned that the wording introduced at the start of this note could be a little alienating. Presenting fidelity to the ethical commitments of deliberative democracy feels somehow too demanding as a starting point. This is not to suggest that we want to abandon normative theory altogether. Rather, our aim is to bring deliberative theory and practice closer together, and developing the concept of deliberative integrity using normative theory only, in isolation from practice, could serve to maintain a distance between the two. For our work to have traction within the fields of practice and policy, it is important that the language and framing resonate. Therefore, how can we conceptualise deliberative integrity in a way that holds up normative principles and also demonstrates the tangible benefits of committing to it in practice?

Towards a grounded concept of deliberative integrity

While working with normative theory and the existing ethical commitments of deliberative democracy, it is also important to ground the normative definition of deliberative integrity in the lived experiences of scholars, practitioners, and policymakers. Typically as theorists and empirical scholars of deliberative democracy we begin our research with a set of established principles

identified by political theorists and operationalise these principles to assess the deliberative quality of empirical practice. The Discourse Quality Index comes to mind, where the Habermasian principles are operationalised to assess the quality of deliberation (Steenbergen et al 2003). And, indeed, the provision definition of deliberative integrity we provided earlier comes from this tradition of normative theorising, where we draw on moral philosophy to structure our definition of deliberative integrity.

While this approach advanced deliberative scholarship in the past decades, we argue that this is no longer enough at a time when there are increasing calls to 'deparochialise political theory' and recognise that the 'truths we hold to be self-evident have arisen within a sociohistorically specific context' (Tully 2020: 25). The deliberative principles or the moral commitments mentioned earlier, in their currently dominant and contemporary theoretical construction, are produced within the specific context of liberal democracies whereas deliberative principles and practice are more diverse and constantly negotiated (Ackerley et al 2021).

Moreover, we are also conscious that solely relying on top-down normative theorising could be perceived as 'imposing' normative standards from a place of relative detachment of academia and political theory into real life deliberative practice, where the realities of politics and decision-making might always fall short of our normative hopes and dreams (Ackerley et al 2021). We are not alone in these concerns, as one of our interview respondents pointed out:

"...they [academics] are so divorced from what's going on that I'm not sure how useful they are...a lot of the work I feel is being written at a sort of hyper abstract, hyper normative level, you know, kind of a level of idealism, if you like...they seem to be operating in in a theoretical world which is sort of so far away from what practice looks like."

Plurality

Instead of solely anchoring our definition of deliberative integrity to top-down theorising, we argue that we need to pluralise and ground our understanding of deliberative integrity. Our approach to conceptualising deliberative integrity recognises that normative principles generate their meaning as they are situated or grounded in everyday political experiences of various political actors.

It is these 'grounded' normative principles that we aim to uncover in our research by bringing to surface the seemingly mundane albeit meaningful practices and issues of public deliberation that oftentimes get lost in the picture when deliberative scholars solely rely on traditional normative political theory. We will not be able to, and neither are we inclined to provide a single, concrete definition of deliberative integrity. Instead, we want to highlight that different actors involved in

deliberative mini-publics approach them with different expectations, motivations, and goals. Across the community of practitioners, scholars and other policy actors, there are different perceptions about the ethical threats that deliberative processes face, and the potential remedies to deal with them. These divergent perspectives need to be taken into account during the conceptualization of deliberative integrity, not only the assessment of it. This entails taking a recursive approach, working with both normative theory and deliberative practice in dialogue (Ackerly et al 2021). What we want to do is to surface the plurality of understandings of deliberative integrity within and outside the deliberative democracy community.

We propose to do this by using an approach called Q methodology. Q methodology is used to study subjectivity, or rather, shared subjectivity (Brown 1980). Using a combination of qualitative and quantitative techniques, it identifies viewpoints shared among participants on a given topic, which can be interpreted as discourses. In practice, this means asking participants to rank a set of items on a matrix or scale from most disagree to most agree or something similar (Watts and Stenner 2012: 83). Participants must compare and sort the statements relative to each other to ultimately make a 'map' of their viewpoint on the topic. The poles represent the participant's strongest feelings, with the area towards the middle representing more neutral, indifferent or even confused feelings. Participants must themselves rank and compare the statements relative to each other which requires some internal deliberation (Parry forthcoming). Individual 'maps' are then analysed using a form of factor analysis which identifies ways in which participants sorted the items in similar ways, forming factors or clusters which are then interpreted into discourses, shared viewpoints on deliberative integrity.

Q methodology is suitable for our purpose for a number of reasons. Since our aim is to surface the plurality of understandings of deliberative integrity, we first need to understand what the concept means for different actors. Q methodology can help understand the priorities and emphases for different understandings across different contexts. For example, some viewpoints could prioritise deliberative quality of the process itself such as neutral facilitation and a transparent recruitment process for integrity. Others could consider the political conditions such as freedom from manipulation and responsiveness of commissioning authorities to be the underpinnings of integrity. There are a number of possible tensions in the concept of deliberative integrity and implementing it, such as the pull towards standardisation versus flexibility and adaptation. Using Q Methodology will also allow us to explore these tensions in detail and understand the extent to which they might be central to understandings of deliberative integrity. The Q analysis can tell us, for example, if views are polarised on some points, as well as points of consensus. The factors that emerge

cannot be controlled and they exist as ways in which participants sorted the items similarly. This could reveal previously unknown perspectives and views on deliberative integrity.

Using Q Methodology will form one of the first empirical stages in our research. Understanding different discourses on deliberative integrity will help to inform us of the landscape of possible motivations, challenges and priorities for first conceptualising, and then trying to implement any assessment of deliberative integrity. The findings of the study will help inform us how to proceed in the next steps of the deliberative integrity project, to help us understand the different dimensions to the concept, and in so doing, facilitate an on-going and dynamic discussion of what it means to run ethical mini-publics.

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