

The standards debate

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This research note draws on interview data conducted for the deliberative integrity project. It is based on our ongoing analysis and emerging themes and has not been peer-reviewed. For up to date information on the deliberative integrity project, visit www.deliberativeintegrityproject.org

The Standards Debate

Problem

Forms of political participation such as voting and lobbying have commonly agreed standards to monitor their integrity. Deliberative mini-publics have no such commonly agreed standards. Some argue that standards would help uphold integrity and protect credibility, but not everybody feels the same. It is crucial to understand what informs different views as the practice of mini-publics spreads.

Purpose

This research note summarises the key themes on the question of standardisation. It aims to shed light on the different views in the deliberative democracy community about the extent to which standards could (or could not) help to uphold the integrity of deliberative mini-publics.

Approach

This research note presents a thematic analysis of 55 interviews with scholars, practitioners, advocates, policymakers, and public servants in the deliberative democracy community.

Findings

For some, standards are an important route to upholding deliberative integrity. They could ensure quality control and consistency, and support practitioners. Others are more cautious. Standards could detract from the complexities of deliberative practice in diverse contexts, and could even serve to impose a Eurocentric worldview on existing practices.

Value

These findings provide a foundation for the deliberative democracy community to further discuss standardisation.

Introduction

The Deliberative Integrity project aims to identify the ethical dilemmas that deliberative mini-publics face and explore ways of upholding deliberative integrity in practice. One relevant line

of inquiry is the need (or otherwise) to establish international standards for deliberative mini-publics.

As part of our empirical research, we have conducted to date 55 interviews (as of October 2023) with members of the deliberative democracy community. This includes academics, practitioners, public servants, policymakers, and civil society advocates. Most interviewees are located in Europe, Australia, and North America and a minority are in Asia and Latin America.

The aim of our interviews has always been to ground our understanding of deliberative integrity in the lived experiences of the people who study, design, implement, evaluate, and advocate for deliberative mini-publics. We ask a range of questions to elicit interviewees' perceptions and experiences of the ethics, integrity, and governance of mini-publics, as well as ideas for strengthening them.

We are writing a series of research notes that summarise findings from our interviews. This research note provides an overview of our findings on **the standards debate**.

Why standards?

A brief review of relevant literature already reveals divergence on the topic of standards. Standards are seen to potentially support practitioners and embed good practices, by providing certainty and consistency (Mann et al 2014). This is especially relevant to integrity because having standards could help practitioners out when faced with difficult ethical issues during the process. Having standards lightens the load on individual practitioners to carry the integrity of the mini-public. On a higher level, they could also support the perceived legitimacy and credibility of mini-publics (Mann et al 2014).

Concerns about the introduction of standards mention the possibility of imposing uniformity across the very different contexts in which very different mini-public designs are implemented (Christensen and Grant 2020; Hendriks and Carson 2008; Mann et al 2014). Striving to meet technical standards could be a distraction from adaptability and sensitivity to local contexts and needs, and the real problems at hand (Hendriks and Carson 2008). Standardisation could then serve to de-legitimise other forms of deliberation and participation that do not conform (Bherer et al 2017). Some argue that standardisation could thus be perceived as a 'neo-colonial move or an expansion of the neoliberal regime of governance – with the counterproductive effect of reducing acceptance and legitimacy' (Mann et al 2014: 20).

We ask people about standards because as mini-publics become more mainstream, the field may well head in this direction, and this has implications for the practice of deliberative democracy and future trajectory of the field.

We asked people

What do you think about establishing standards for mini-publics? Could this help to uphold integrity? Where do you stand on this question? Have you been part of this conversation?

Why do we need (or not need) standards?

There are different views on whether standards are needed, helpful or a priority. For some, standards are the next logical and necessary step for mini-publics. Some feel that the debate around standards is a sign of the field maturing, and a natural progression for a community of practice. Other fields have standards (elections, participatory budgeting commission in Brazil), so mini-publics should not be any different. Not having standards could undermine the overall cause and credibility of mini-publics.

But for others, standards are not a priority. There are other more pressing issues, like the integration of DMPs into broader political and policy systems. Paying attention to standards could end up becoming a distraction from more important concerns for the field like integrating mini-publics with broader political systems. Even worse, meeting them could become a box-ticking exercise that overlooks the nuances and complexities of practice in reality. In general, and even for those who support the idea of establishing standards, there is concern about the possible negatives and their potentially constraining effect. Some of these concerns are related to having standards around procedural aspects such as the OECD point that a process has to be a minimum of four days (OECD 2020). Other concerns are about the ability to meet any standards in practice, which could serve to unjustly delegitimize processes that do not meet these criteria. Some of these concerns are explained in more detail later. Overall, there is a sense that we need a full exploration of the potential downsides of establishing standards.

People are in favour of standards because they can be a useful point of reference. They could support or protect practitioners when they are in difficult situations: it helps to be able to point to an independent set of standards. This could be especially helpful for less experienced practitioners, who do not have experience of navigating difficult ethical issues. Standards could also be helpful to point policymakers to as well, to demonstrate the legitimacy and integrity of the process.

There is quite a lot of concern about the misuse of the deliberative name, ie. calling any old consultation deliberative. Some people feel like having common standards can help to counter this and protect the integrity of the deliberative name. It helps to build a common language that the entire community of practice can refer to and build upon. This common language would help to manage expectations around mini-publics and support consistency, as well as quality control.

Definitely want standards and a framework, and it's a really big worry for us. Because we're seeing a lot of practice being called deliberative, but that's not deliberative.

And we feel that if it's misused that language, and for processes which aren't good, then it will undermine the credibility of the work (anonymous interview #10).

How should standards be decided (and by whom)?

Who gets to decide any standards, and the process for doing so, is important to people. A lot of people talked about the value of discussing standards within the community of practice. Even if they didn't strongly support the idea of creating standards, they saw a lot of value in these discussions anyway. It's important that any standards conversation involves practitioners and isn't just an academic exercise. One person said that the broader public should also be engaged in this conversation; another suggestion was holding a mini-public to inform the standards themselves.

A few people are worried that standards are likely to get decided within a European or Eurocentric paradigm, and that this assumes they can be universally applicable, overlooking contextual nuances and underlying assumptions. Any discussion about standards should certainly be transparent, open and inclusive:

The thing that's missing from many of, you know, from those guidelines, is all of the contextual assumptions that underlie them... we should just drag those right out into the open... so we can compare it against whatever context we're actually in to see if this particular prescription still holds. Or, you know, if it's harmful, if it needs to be changed, if it is impractical, and so on. So, there's a lot of tension, right. And a lot of trade-offs, which I think means that if we're to develop guidelines, I mean, they should be viewed as starting points, at best. They should be developed in conjunction with a truly global cohort, right? Global North, Global South, you know, that understands the implications of those choices and can bring those into discussion (anonymous interview #51).

...we probably take quite a Eurocentric view of this a lot of the time, and would probably do well to do some learning from other places... if we're thinking about standards for deliberative mini-publics (anonymous interview #1).

What should standards be like?

There seems to be little desire overall to create very specific, procedurally prescriptive standards. People want standards to be flexible and adaptable to different circumstances. If standards are not flexible, they could stifle innovation and creativity in practice. Thus, they need to be both broad and flexible. Having said that, some people worry that having very broad principles could end up being useless because they can be interpreted and applied so differently. Very broad standards might oversimplify the complexities of practice in reality. Standards ideally need to be able to account for some level of complexity, considering things like scale (from local to transnational) as well as structural issues such as the connection of the mini-public to the broader political system. One idea is to keep standards as dynamic and reflexive, being open to revision and evolution over time.

... having a standard could be useful for trying to do good things worldwide, but then allowing for plasticity or flexibility in this framework, which to me always remains super important. Because I really doubt that the kind of one-size-fits-all solution is what we are looking for, as both advocates and analysts of mini-publics (anonymous interview #25).

There are some different views on whether we need minimum standards or best practices. The OECD's work on deliberation was seen by some as the former and some as the latter. A few people mentioned that some of these principles are expensive to implement, so if those are minimum standards it makes them unmeetable in some contexts. People feel uncomfortable about labeling some mini-publics as 'not good enough' if this is the case.

How would standards work in practice?

A couple of practical concerns are around implementation. It needs to be clear who these standards would apply to: does a local council running a panel need to meet the same standards as a high-profile national citizens' assembly? It should also be clear that they apply only to mini-publics, and are not trying to delegitimise other deliberative and participatory practices.

Some people worry about the feasibility of meeting standards in different contexts. This is about affordability, but also about political contexts. How feasible is it to meet a single set of standards in authoritarian contexts, for example? And if those standards are not met - who is judged accordingly?

One key concern is about whether having standards would necessarily help achieve the aims outlined above. Some people talked about needing oversight or monitoring, in real time, throughout

the process. Someone who is there, alongside practitioners, as those difficult situations arise. Having standards and evaluating them is not the same as real-time monitoring. This is related to different takes on evaluation. For some, independent evaluation is valuable in supporting integrity, but for a few others, only monitoring will do because an external evaluator does not have access to all the relevant information.

The single biggest concern about standards is about context. This ranges from concerns about methodological and practical diversity across contexts, to different country and cultural contexts. Some people feel like this can be overcome by having flexible and adaptable standards. For others, this is more than a practical concern. Standardisation is about imposing uniformity, likely from a Eurocentric perspective, that flattens out contextual differences and assumes some kind of superiority over existing forms of participation in other places (Ross 2023). This concern reflects the one mentioned in the literature above, that standardisation operates as a form of neo-colonialism. Even those who do not mention words like Eurocentrism and colonialism are still concerned about context.

Conclusion

We hope the deliberative democracy community of practice will consider these findings as conversation starters as discussions about standards for deliberative mini-publics continue. Would standards actually help to uphold the integrity of deliberative mini-publics, ensuring quality, credibility and consistency? Is it possible to establish standards that are sufficiently flexible to enable adaptation and innovation? How can we ensure that any conversation about standards is genuinely and equitably global? Addressing these questions will be crucial for the community of practice as the field matures further.

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