Deliberative Forums in the Welfare State Futures – Our Children's Europe Project: Practical Issues

Prof. Peter Taylor-Gooby, University of Kent

Note: the discussion of practical issues in relation to Deliberative Forums below draws heavily on Burkhardt (2012)

This paper gives a very brief introduction to recent discussion of Deliberative Forums (DFs) by political scientists and by attitude researchers. It reviews some of the DF literature, defines and describes DFs, locates them in relation to other qualitative research methods, identifies and discusses the main methodological disputes, suggests appropriate ways forward to meet our research interests, draws conclusions with pointers for our practice and identifies issues we need to discuss and resolve at our conference.

Introduction

Two major developments have directed the interest of political and social scientists towards Deliberative Forums. One of the major developments in recent democratic theory has been a shift away from a concept of democracy as a system for ensuring that governments respond to the wishes of a largely passive electorate (Almond and Verba, 1963) and for managing disagreements about the overall direction of policy within that electorate (Dahl 1961 early, 2010; Lijphart 1999), to one of democracy as an active institutional framework for promoting more widespread deliberation and citizen engagement (Mouffe 2000; Dryzek 2010; Goodin 2009; Chambers 2003, 308; Carpini et al. 2005, 316). At the same time attitude theorists have moved away from a positivist concept of attitudes as original within the individual to a more social one of attitudes as developing through interaction and expression in debate.

These changes are bound up with a number of developments: psychological theories that understand values as developed through interaction, rather than simply from the individual; economic approaches that shift away from a simple rational actor model to one which sees preferences as constructed within economic formations (for example, the New Institutionalism); the emergence of a whole range of groups and interests demanding engagement within the political process (Snow and Soule 2010); shifts in international aid and development towards programmes that require donor countries to consult with and actively engage with the populations of countries which receive aid (for example, the World Bank Civil Society programme: World Bank, 2014); developments such as the Porto Alegre participatory budget-holding initiative (de Sousa 2005), now reflected elsewhere; concern about citizen alienation in western democracies; and a whole range of approaches associated with an increased emphasis on individual dignity and human rights which have led to shifts in the way power-holders treat others in areas ranging from legal systems to medicine, from science and risk policy to local government. A foundational argument underlying both democratic theory and theories about attitudes and values is Habermas' concept of political legitimacy as derived from an 'ideal speech situation' in which all those concerned can

communicate with good will and beyond the influence of interests so that differences in political values can be negotiated justly (Habermas, 1996).

Deliberative forums and participatory democracy

Policy-focused participative democracy has been developed in many fields: citizen's assemblies, electoral reform (Warren and Pearce (2008), Citizen's Initiative legislation (Gastil 2013; Gastil and Knobloch 2010), participatory planning exercises, Renn, 2008, ch.8), health care planning (Parkinson 2004), policy debates such as the UK People's Parliament or the EU's Europolis (Economist 1995), participative budgeting to foster local involvement in international poverty programmes (Baiocchi 2001; de Sousa 2005) and in Deliberative Opinion Polling in Australia, Bulgaria, Canada, China, Hungary, Italy, Japan, Korea, Poland and the US. Participaedia provides a valuable open-source directory on such initiatives (Fung and Waren 2011). DFs may be defined as involving interaction that is participative and based on reason (and hence involves respect for the viewpoints of others and a commitment to openness) and is directed at finding a solution to a problem or a common understanding of an issue (Carpini et al, 2004, 318-9). It should be noted that this does not imply that the forum will necessarily generate consensus, or that individual arguments will not be influenced by interests, but that any differences will be subject to reason so that disagreements will be transparently stated in the outcome.

Commentators stress a number of characteristics of DFs: openness, transparency, access and inclusiveness; reciprocity, participation and respect for others; adaptability and learning; commitment to reason (Ank 2011; Papadopoulos and Warin, 2007; Gutmann and Thompson, 1996, Chilvers, 2008; Fishkin, 2009; Goodin and Dryzek 2006). These boil down to an over-riding concern with public engagement through reasoned deliberation.

DFs typically meet over an extended period and/or on several occasions. They may call on witnesses (usually 'experts' in relevant fields) for advice or information, although some approaches stress much more the importance of 'bottom-up' research (Wakeford, 2007; Wakeford and Singh, 2008), and others start from the position that people experiencing an issue are the best experts (Narayan, 2000). Moderation can include: setting down an agenda of issues; guiding the direction and pace of the discussion; focusing the group on tasks such as examining specific issues in a particular order or arriving at a conclusion.

They may be oriented around a particular policy issue or more general. They may be loosely representative of the population a large or of specific groups, or involve over-sampling of minorities (Burkhardt 2012); they may include before and after surveys to gauge attitude change as in the Fishkin (2009) model; the researcher interest may be primarily in the conclusions, or in the basis of the conclusions or the extent of attitude change.

Range of applications of DFs

The extension of participatory democracy is one aspect of interest in DFs. *Participaedia* (http://participedia.net/) indicates that DFs have been used in five main ways:

- As a way of arriving at democratic agreement in making policy.

- As a way of consulting the mass public by policy-makers who will themselves make the decisions. This is particularly valuable in the case of highly controversial decision (Renn describes the use of DFs as a means of arriving at a collective community viewpoint on the siting of an unpopular waste incinerator. The forums concluded that the possibly poisonous plant should be located upwind of the main regional administrative building. Their advice was not taken: Renn 2008, ch. 8).
- As a way of legitimating a decision that is already preferred by policy-makers, by allowing others to discuss it (for, the UK 'Great Debate' on GM Food, which in the event failed to endorse the government's preferred strategy of much greater market openness).
- Closely allied to the above, as a way of testing out the strength of public reaction to a decision that has already been made: for example the UK consultation on Universal Credit and other reforms that is interpreted as endorsing the proposals (DWP 2010).
- As a research tool, to examine public attitudes and how and whether they change during discussion with others and in response to expert opinion.

DFs in social science research: the relationship between DFs and other qualitative attitude research methods

Table 1 below sums up the relationship between DFs and other attitude research methods. DFs are founded on an interpretative view of the world; are directed at reasoned consensus; involve expectations of openness to change, learning and engagement; often using expert input; and are pursued by medium-sized groups over time.

This gives it some advantages over other methods (capacity to study development of attitudes through interaction in a setting which may be theoretically argued to be closer to the way attitudes are formed in real life; capacity to understand why people hold the attitudes they do, how strong they are and what would influence change). The main methodological issues are that the DFs are heavily context-dependent. A recent review of the empirical literature concludes that outcomes are strongly influenced by the purpose, participants, decision-making conventions, rules governing interaction (formal or informal), provision of information, participants' prior beliefs, and the real-world conditions under which the forum takes place (Carpini et al, 2004, 336). The main practical shortcomings are representativeness and the time and resources involved. For these reasons, DF findings are often related to sample survey findings, and DF methodology is fairly rare.

Table 1A: Comparison with other Qualitative Approaches

	Typical sample	***Typical duration***	***Representativeness***	***Objective***	***Expert contribution normally assumed***
Deliberative research	10-1000	Several days+	Typically, participants share values with population of interest	Arrive at a consensus through public reasoning	Y
Participatory research (including Focus Groups)	Groups of 8-10	2 hours	Share meanings with population of interest	State people's attitudes and their responses to challenge	N
Action research	Community or minority group	1 day +	The expression of the interest	Express values; empowerment	N
In-depth interviews	1 by 1	60+ mins	Share meanings with population of interest	For researcher to understand meanings behind pattern of interviewee's attitudes	N
Attitude surveys	1000+	45 mins	Statistical probability sample	For researcher to understand pattern of interviewee's attitudes as expressed	N

Table 1B: Comparison with other Qualitative Approaches (continued)

	Engagement with others	***Expectation of attitude change***	***Epistemology: positive/ individualist vs. interpretative; pre-existing vs. constructed***
Deliberative research	Respectful and open to other's views	Y	Attitudes constructed through interaction

Participatory research (including Focus Groups)	Not necessarily open to other's views	N	Attitudes constructed through interaction
Action research	Y	No: changing community attitudes or local policies?	Neutral
In-depth interviews	N	N	Attitudes properties of individual; pre-existing
Attitude surveys	N	N	Attitudes properties of individual; pre-existing

Note: adapted from Burkhardt (2012) Table 1.

Characteristics of DFs

We wish to use DFs as a research tool rather than as a means of arriving at or justifying a public policy decision. Our project addresses the following three questions:

- ***RQ1:*** What are the aspirations of ordinary citizens when they look to the future of state welfare in their children's Europe, what are their priorities and how strongly are they held? How are preferences justified?

- ***RQ2:*** What assumptions and values underlie the pattern of aspirations? How do people understand the factors driving change? How do fiscal and other constraints enter into people's views on the welfare state?

- ***RQ3:*** How does the changing social, political and economic context of welfare policy interact with people's expectations and attitudes? What cleavages and solidarities are emerging?

We go on (in the proposal) to argue that "answers to RQs 1 and 2 will enable us to chart solidarities and cleavages between different social groups in relation to welfare state issues and analyse the underlying values and assumptions in varying national contexts. These answers will be developed in relation to RQ3, dealing with the changing social, political and economic context of welfare to examine how attitudes and with them the potential for solidarities and cleavages is likely to develop under different scenarios of welfare state development."

In short we want to find out what people's priorities are for the future of welfare, what assumptions underlie them and what cleavages and solidarities are likely to emerge. Both our qualitative methods, focus groups and deliberative forums, enable us to

examine priorities and meanings, the DFs in reasoned debate over time, the FGs in more immediate interaction.

DFs offer the opportunity to examine processes of reasoning and learning or developing a position over time in interaction with the views of others. Our approach contrasts with that of many users of DF who are more interested in outcomes (the decisions people arrive at from rational deliberation) rather than the process of deliberative decision making. The outcome may be a final consensus or at least a measure of agreement or disagreement between various groups.

DFs also enable researchers to contrast attitudes, expressed in a context where the emphasis is on public reasoning, with those encountered in other forms of research, most notably from Focus Groups, which share with DFs an emphasis on interaction. In addition, DFs offer opportunities to conduct experiments by providing different forms of moderation and expert information.

The literature indicates that DFs vary in five main characteristics: selection of participants, provision of evidence, nature of deliberation, use of expert interventions, and analysis and interpretation. As in all areas of research, methodological assumptions are likely to influence outcomes and findings.

The main lines of disagreement are over:

- Whether the principle of DFs must involve representative population sampling, to ensure democratic representation (Fishkin 2009);
- The kind of moderation involved, from a minimal stating of the issue to be addressed to directing the forum towards the objective and constraining debate within the alternatives decided by the sponsors (Barnes et al 2003).
- The extent to which outside 'experts' are involved (Sprain et al 2014)
- The extent to which DFs involve openness to learning and attitude change (Burkhardt 2012, 5; Fishkin, 2009; Carpini, 2004).

Practical research choices

We will examine these issues in more detail and apply them to our own interests in understanding possibilities for solidarity on welfare state policy-making.

Participants: number and recruitment

Selection varies according to the objective of the activity. Number of participants can vary from a dozen (a citizen's jury) to upwards of a thousand (British Columbia consultation: Fishkin 2013; G1000 in Belgium, Vermeersch, 2011). Some scholars argue that it is essential to ensure a fully representative sample and go to great lengths to approximate to this (for example, Dienel 1999 and Fishkin and Luskin 2005). The claim is that only then can the exercise claim to reflect a 'real-world' distribution of people's views and interests. Others argue for over-sampling of relevant minorities, in order to ensure their inclusion in the discussion. Wakeford argues that statistical sampling risks reproducing the marginalisation of minorities (2007). An experiment in over-representation of diabetes type 1 sufferers in a study on this issue led to a situation in which this group was seen as 'experts' and tended to dominate discussion (Evans and

Kotchetkova (2009). Other researchers dilute the statistical representativeness requirement to broad representation of the main demographic groups, roughly equivalent to quota sampling.

Others point out that individuals may identify themselves as members of a demographic group in any case, vitiating any attempt to reflect society (Smith and Wales 2007). This point is taken further by recent work in social psychology which understands individuals as able to choose between a number of aspects of their identity to 'position' themselves. Thus one person might present themselves as representing one of a range of interests or areas of expertise (woman/ mother/ low-paid worker/ union member/ expert on local politics etc.), rather than as simply a bearer of a particular interest (for example working class) for which they were selected in sampling (O'Doherty et al, 2010).

It is clear that selection procedures will reflect researcher's assumptions about the distribution and nature of the attitudes to be investigated and will influence the process and outcomes of the DF. **Our interest** in population attitudes and in the views of the interest groups generally understood in the literature to be relevant to welfare debates (the principal cleavages being by gender, social class and income group, life and family stage and ethnicity) suggest that we should aim at general representation of the population.

Duration of deliberation

The length of the activity varies from one-day events for deliberative summits (OLR 2005, 2006), two day deliberative polls (Fishkin and Luskin 2005) with a break between to three one day meeting exercises (2009) and three to five days (Citizens' juries). The key differences concern the capacity to develop reasoned debate and the extent to which it is possible to supply evidence.

Our interest is in processes of deliberation, the formation of solidarities and cleavages and what makes a difference to this. This suggests that we should extend debate over three meetings in order to permit maximum opportunities for debate, reflection and change.

Facilitation and Framing the Issues

Most commentators agree that some moderation is essential (O'Doherty et al. 2012). In order to achieve consistency the approach to moderation must be agreed in advance. Bone et al. (2006) describe this in terms of the preparation of an 'issues book', which sets parameters for the debate and for the conclusions. There is considerable evidence that, in practice, processes of facilitation often constrain DFs set up in public consultations (for example, Barnes et al. 2003). Facilitation may vary from minimalist to repeatedly interventionist. The trade-off here is between focus on issues the researcher wishes to examine against the capacity to understand the DF participants' own naive approach to the question. Light-touch approaches may lead to discrimination against less assertive groups in the conduct of the forum (Davies *et al*, 2006).

Moderation may be helpful in leading the DF to direct its discussion towards a conclusion. Researchers must establish a trade-off between a clearly formulated conclusion and the capacity to examine processes of attitude formation. Dillard (2013)

recommends that the approach to moderation must be agreed in advance and taken account of in analysis.

Our interests suggest that we will need moderation, preferably by an experienced professional organisation, to

- Agree the ground-rules for reasoned debate and conduct exercises to ensure that these are understood;
- Constrain debate within very broad parameters. I suggest these are based on the question: 'What can government do for the welfare of its citizens, looking forward over 25 years?' as stated in the proposal;
- Agree the list of topics to be examined in the forums (I suggest we agree a common list and make suggestions for this in the companion paper; national teams may wish to include other topics in pursuit of national issues or issues of theoretical interest to the team.);
- Agree whether evidence is needed and what is needed;
- Seek to ensure that more or less assertive individuals are equally able to express their views;
- Manage the presentation of expert material, questioning of experts at the second meeting;
- Guide the third meeting of the DF to a conclusion that negotiates consensus where this is possible and identifies where it is not.

Provision of evidence

For many of the issues which are examined through the use of DFs, organisers wish to provide information to participants, since participants have little knowledge of the considerations that weight heavily with policy-makers. On the face of it, there is a contradiction between pursuing DFs on the grounds that these institutions value the judgements of ordinary people, rather than policy experts, and then introducing expert evidence which may have an effect on the discussion. Guttman analyses the Israel Health Parliament to illustrate this (Guttman 2007; see also Abelson et al, 2007). Gleason (2011) argues strongly that expert evidence is a real constraint on debate and should therefore be introduced with great care. However, there appears to be some merit in the argument that while evidence may influence outcomes, this is no different from the way political discourse is conducted in real life and in other contexts (Neblo 2011). Carson recommends agreeing evidence beforehand with an independent panel. This pushes the problem back one stage. This leads others to stress the capacity of the DF to summon its own independent evidence (Coote and Lenaghan, 1997; White, Lewis and Elam, 1999).

Further issues concern direction of the discussion: evidence may incline participants to frame issues on which there are often widespread misunderstandings (inequality; social mobility; the numbers of immigrants) in particular ways. These may be the issues which the designers wish to investigate. Burkhardt (2012) is unclear how far their own presentation on inequality and its impact led to responses which identified a specific list of capabilities as essential to citizenship in their exercise.

Our interests could be pursued through 'naïve' deliberation, in which the basis of reasoned debate is the initial understanding of the issues that are relevant by

participants. Alternatively we could focus debate more by providing information. In addition we could make experts available for the forums to cross-examine on the issues so that agreed information was available in a way that allowed the participants to retain a substantial measure of control. On balance I suggest that this is the best way to proceed, to allow us to retain some control over the issues and how they are understood, yet trade this off against autonomy by participants in the way the issues are discussed. This means we need to agree a list of relevant issues.

Before and after survey

In the proposal we argued that a survey would be appropriate to gauge attitude shifts in the FGs but might bias responses in the DFs by framing the issues. However, we will have to purse some framing to make the national surveys comparable and to focus on relevant welfare state issues. Attitude change is more likely to take place over the period of the DFs rather than in the relatively short-run FGs. **Our interests** would argue for a before and after survey for the DFs. Details of how such a survey might be based on ESS questions are included in the *Research Design* paper.

Analysis and Interpretation

These can be directed at two main areas: outcomes and process. In relation to the outcome of the discussion, a clear conclusion limits the role for the researcher, although exploration of sub-group differences may be possible (Evans and Kotchetkova, 2009). Disagreements Crocker (2003) are also of interest, especially where these are unresolved encourages, as are the arguments that appear to weigh most heavily in discussion (Van Stokkom, 2005; White *et al*, 1999). Fishkin argues that attitude shifts are important and includes short before and after quantitative surveys with a small number of questions in order to gauge attitude shifts.

In relation to **our interests**, the process of discussion the above issues (disagreement, reasons for conclusions) are important and should be identified, as well as responses to expert information. However, we are particularly interested in process, in order to identify areas where solidarity can be achieved and where it is much harder. These require information on how attitudes shifted among different groups, and what considerations led to shifts. This must rest on recording of discussion and analysis of the recordings.

Clearly, interpretation can stress different aspects of DF activity and so support rather different conclusions. **Our interests** suggest a systematised approach and I suggest this is pursued through thematic analysis (which can then be organised through various software packages, depending on the skills of researchers).

Conclusions: pointers to practice for the OCE study

DFs are a relatively new research tool. So far as we know they have been used more in political science experiments to advance democratic process, rather than attitudinal research and not so far in comparative cross-national research on the welfare state. They

offer opportunities to examine rational deliberation on welfare state issues by non-experts that are not available from any other method. As such they provide a strong indication the positions people would arrive at if they were not influenced by self-interest and other non-rational factors.

Any DF project must make choices in a number of areas, most importantly: in relation to sampling, number of participants, the duration, framing, moderation and facilitation of the discussion, any interventions to provide evidence and the extent to which it is directed towards a conclusion. We suggest various approaches above: rough representation of the population with 30 to 40 participants over 3 one-day sessions, with moderate facilitation (framing the issues, agreeing ground-rules and a list of issues, agreeing evidence and expertise to be accessed, enabling full participation of more and les assertive people and guiding towards a conclusion), and an analytic approach that rests on observation, recording and thematic analysis to examine progress of the deliberation and the movements towards solidarity or lack of them between different groups on various issues.

At the Kick-Off Conference we need to:

1. Discuss the conduct and organisation of the DFs further following the above points and in the light of the separate paper on Research Design; and
2. Agree a list of topics to be included. I suggest the following as discussed in the *Research Design* paper. Some of these cut across several areas:
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    - Class issues: future of middle class; inequality; dualisation (overlapping with labour market issues); (Note: the interests of the advantaged high income group correspond to class cleavage theories);
    - Gender issues: child care; social care; opportunities (overlapping with labour market issues)
    - Labour market issues: employment, equal opportunities; child care; education and training; wage levels; (overlap with class and gender/family);
    - The impact of population ageing and associated issues on the welfare state: pensions; social care; health care; disability;
    - Ethnicity: discrimination and equal opportunities; closely related to religious issues and the increasing importance of Islam in some countries; (some overlap with migration issues).
    - Globalisation issues: migration; competitiveness
    - EU issues: future of EU (EU governance; two-tier membership; role of ECB); EU migration
    - Governance and state issues: equal rights; taxation; role of state, private, community sectors.
3. Discuss the before and after survey and decide how to pursue this.

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