Public involvement and competent communities: Towards a social psychology of public participation

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Abstract

This paper seeks to contribute to the debates about public involvement by suggesting how social psychology concepts can contribute to the theorization of public deliberation and the empirical analysis of participatory settings. The article addresses the critical issues concerning the psychosocial processes underlying deliberative settings that result from the relationship between individuals and groups. Personality dispositions, cognitive processes, and group dynamics are discussed. Specifically, personality traits, the role of social value orientation, need for cognitive closure, and need for cognition presented. Regarding cognition, socio-cognitive conflict and framing processes are examined. Finally, as far as group dynamics is concerned, two manifestations of social influence are presented, namely, persuasion and polarization. The paper concludes by highlighting the theoretical and practical implications for the design, implementation and evaluation of public involvement practices.

Key words: Public deliberation; Public involvement; Citizen participation; Deliberative democracy

1. Introduction

The importance of involving the public in attempts to improve communities has been recognized for many years. Such importance is based primarily on the belief that the participation of the public in public policy debates will increase the quality of policy making (Bichard, 1999). Although the majority of public involvement practices entails only consultative forms of participation that could be easily classified as 'tokenism' (Arnstein, 1969), such practices allow community members to voice their needs and be heard by institutions. Even if citizens are not allowed to make a final decision, public involvement practices are still tools for shaping responsible and effective public policies that can change the material circumstances of people's lives. For this reason, they contribute to the creation of competent communities, i.e. communities that utilize and develop the resources that lead members to make reasoned decisions about the issues confronting them (Iscoe, 1974). At a theoretical though often implicit level, public involvement practices rely on the notion of deliberative democracy (Habermas, 1989; 1996), a communicative model emphasizing dialogue, equality, fairness, and a focus on the public good (Cohen, 1996; 1997).

According to many political scientists, public deliberation, aside from increasing the qualities of policies, also increases levels of political (Eggins, Reynolds, Oakes, & Mavor, 2007; Gastil, Deess, & Weiser, 2002) and civic engagement (Delli Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004). This article addresses critical issues concerning the psychosocial processes underlying public deliberation. A major part of the literature, both theoretical and empirical, is grounded in a sociological or political theory, whereas some, albeit less, research has been conducted from a psychological perspective (see for instance Mannarini, 2009; Mendelberg, 2002; Steenberger, Bächtiger, Spörndli, & Steiner, 2004; Van Stokkom, 2005). Nevertheless, psychological insight into the concrete applications of deliberative democracy may be beneficial to advancing theory and practice, and such insight may contribute to a more complete understanding and lead to a more accurate design and evaluation of public involvement settings.

2. Deliberation in groups

All the psychological implications discussed in this paper result from the relationship between individuals and groups and are aimed at describing how individual and group variables can affect public deliberation. Indeed, irrespective of the specific characteristics of the setting in which deliberation occurs, all the initiatives for public involvement are based on small group discussions. So the starting point of the argument is that citizens involved in public deliberation constitute a group, though often for only a limited period of time. From a structural point of view, groups involved in deliberative settings can be defined as task-oriented groups. Task orientation implies that such groups function as any other work group. To perform at their maximum potential, they need to have a clearly set goal, a shared method for activities and procedures, effective communication patterns, good relational interchanges, and low levels of conflict.

In order to monitor the course state, the majority of deliberative settings include a facilitation role, the main aim of which is to help the group accomplish its task. After having concisely defined the group nature of public deliberation, the following paragraph will present and discuss the specific psychological variables that can be considered for the advancement of theory and research.

3. Psychosocial processes

Drawing attention to psychological dynamics enables an easier understanding of the success and failure of discursive rationality (Habermas, 1996), the course of which also depends on the presence and overcoming of psychological barriers (Steenbergen, Bächtiger, Spörndli, & Steiner, 2004). For example, when participants do not trust each other, are demotivated, do not feel included in a group, or do not have adequate communicative, argumentative, or cognitive skills, the quality of deliberation is likely to be affected. If social influence is ignored in its inner devices, changes in preferences are difficult to explain. Similarly, if cognitive processes at both the individual and group levels are disregarded, group decision-making cannot be properly described. Practical questions thus emerge, such as: How do people feel when they are required to collaborate without having a say on procedures and interlocutors? What are their motivations? How do they select and elaborate information? How do individual and social differences influence the debate? How does social influence affect decisions? Psychology enters deliberative settings at multiple levels -- personality, cognitive processes, and group dynamics. These dimensions and their relevance for public deliberation will be addressed in the remainder of this article.

3.1 Personality

Generally speaking, all personal dispositions can influence deliberative processes and outcomes: competitive attitudes, social dominance, power motives – just to mention a few examples – are likely to interfere with a deliberative approach (Reykowski, 2006), as well as communicative and argumentative skills. This paragraph will present and discuss three personality traits – which are not meant to be the only ones – that are likely to weigh in favor or against deliberation: social value orientation, the need for cognitive closure, and the need for cognition.

Social Value Orientation

The role of values and norms in orienting human behaviors has been widely acknowledged in the psychological literature. Recently, the role of values in potentially conflictual situations and social dilemmas has been incorporated in a personality construct, social value orientation. According to De Cremer and Van Vugt (1999), individuals can be grouped in two main categories: proself and prosocial. The more that individuals are prosocial, the more they are likely to maximize collective advantages, even to their own detriment. On the contrary, the more that individuals are proself, the more they are likely to maximize personal advantages, to the detriment of others. Prosocials are willing to cooperate, seek equality and be generous, whereas proselfs are focused on personal interests and benefits and show either competitive or individualist attitudes (Van Lange, 1999). How do these psychological types behave when they are embedded in interdependence situations? Prosocials behave prosocially until their counterparts cooperate, but when they feel that justice or equality principles have been violated, they react with punitive uncooperative strategies. Individualist proselfs may behave prosocially for an instrumental purpose, whereas competitive proselfs never behave prosocially, even when they would receive an advantage from such a choice. Prosocials and proselfs also differ in framing social dilemmas: whereas the former are inclined to think in terms of morality and collective rationality, the latter have a proclivity to think in term of power and individual rationality (De Cremer & Van Lange, 2001). To summarize, a prosocial or proself orientation makes a difference in the way people relate to each other in interdependence situations, and such variations have relevant implications for deliberative processes. Personal dispositions that can favor or restrain cooperation – the basic requirement for communicative democracy – account for differences between individuals in the manner in which they address collective issues such as common goods and resources.

Need for Cognitive Closure

The second disposition that will be presented is the need for cognitive closure (NCC), defined as an unspecific need for clear and unambiguous response to events and objects (Kruglanski & Webster, 1996). As a personality variable, the NCC is composed of five factors (Webster & Kruglanski, 1994): a) the need for order and structure; b) an intolerance of ambiguity; c) decisiveness, regarded as impulsiveness in decision making; d) the need for predictability; and e) close-mindedness, meant as refusal or avoidance of diversity. Nevertheless, NCC can increase or decrease according to the circumstances and as benefits associated with either closure or openness become more salient. For instance, under time pressure or when information processing is particularly demanding, closure is preferred to openness. On the contrary, when individuals are afraid to make mistakes or have a personal motive for being accurate and cautious, openness is chosen.

NCC can affect information processing, manifesting itself in two tendencies: the inclination to "seize" available information and the propensity to "freeze" information, stopping the search for further data (Kruglanski & Webster, 1996). Because of these two tendencies, individuals with high NCC are at risk of processing little information and generating a limited number of hypotheses. They are likely to base their opinions on data that are already available in memory and therefore are amply exposed to primacy effects and tend to massively use stereotypes and heuristics. Notable effects of NCC are also visible in social interaction, especially in groups. The inclination towards a stable and secure knowledge can manifest itself as a preference for opinions that are shared by a large majority and an aversion to minority or deviant positions. Individuals with high NCC are likely to seek people who have similar opinions (Kruglanski, Shah, Pierro, & Mannetti, 2002) and show positive interpersonal attitudes towards individuals who facilitate consensus rather than those who foment dissent. Mannarini, Fedi and Trippetti (in press) showed that in loose structured participatory settings (such as the Open Space Technology) participants with high NCC cannot effectively cope with uncertainty and ambiguity, and are likely to escape similar situations in the future.

Need for Cognition

The third disposition that will be considered is need for cognition. Defined as the tendency to undertake demanding cognitive activities, need for cognition is currently regarded as one of the factors able to explain why people exposed to persuasive messages choose to accurately process information or to discard it on the basis of simple cues and heuristics (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982; Cacioppo, Petty, Kao, & Rodriguez, 1986). Individuals with low need for cognition are able to distinguish relevant from irrelevant arguments; nevertheless, they are unwilling to tolerate demanding cognitive tasks. Compared to these people, individuals who have an intrinsic motivation to deepen their knowledge are more sensitive to the quality of the information provided, less inclined to change their attitudes without due examination, and less likely to ignore, avoid, or distort information. The relevance of such a construct in interdependence situations stems from two properties: the ability of individuals with a high need for cognition to influence others and their resistance to attitude change (Shestowski, Wegener, & Fabrigar, 1998). Compared to people with low need for cognition, they show more stable attitudes and are more motivated in defending their views and persuading others. On the whole, the analysis of the distribution of need for cognition enables the prediction of which group members are likely to be particularly persuasive or particularly resistant to persuasive messages.

To conclude, people participate in groups with different intensities and styles. The reasons why some members affect decisions more than others cannot be sought exclusively in sociological attributes such as age, gender, and education, nor in group dynamics (as it will be discussed later), but also in personality traits. Social value orientation, need for cognitive closure and need for cognition are three examples showing how individual differences play a role in interactive processes. Self-interested vs. collectively oriented individuals, consensus vs. dissent seekers, and persuasive and assertive vs. uncertain and ineffective citizens can confront each other in deliberative settings. Although rules in use in public deliberation can control or at least contain such differences, the construction of collective knowledge cannot bypass the encounter between different individual needs and dispositions.

3.2 Socio-cognitive Processes

Socio-cognitive processes concern the modes through which individuals code and decode information in social interactions in order to make the external world meaningful and orient behaviors. Among socio-cognitive processes, this section will consider conflict and framing.

Socio-cognitive Conflict

The core of deliberative processes is dialogue and interchange of different perspectives through the reciprocal offering of arguments and counter-arguments. This dynamic, which lies at the heart of a truly democratic discussion, entails cognitive conflict. The belief that socio-cognitive conflict (Doise & Mugny, 1981) is the key to collective learning results from the assumption that cognition develops through social interaction and the encounter with different and multiple perspectives rooted in group belongings and life styles. According to this theory, confrontations with others induce individuals to test their own ideas, strategies and opinions, thereby making comparisons, controls, critical revisions, and changes. Hence, conflict represents an opportunity for becoming aware that other views exist on the same object, and multiple solutions and responses are available. Nevertheless, because confronting divergences implies accepting being involved in a relationship with the others, an effort of cognitive coordination is required, which entails cognitive displacement and reciprocity. One of the postulates of deliberation is that parties are able to understand and accept the others' perspective. Such a condition, requiring individuals to undertake a cognitive effort to look at reality from a variety of standpoints, can be analyzed at multiple levels. In the following, we will consider both the intra-individual and the ecological level, the latter including the person-environment system.

At the individual level, we can rely on indications from the social cognition research that prove the conservative property of cognitive schemes and scripts (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). The main function of schemes consists in accelerating and simplifying cognitive activities, thereby facilitating inferences and retrieving in memory scheme-compatible information. Notwithstanding, the use of schemes entails also some risks, leading individuals to cling to schemes even when they are exposed to incompatible and inconsistent information, and selecting data that confirm rather than question what they already know.

At the ecological level, we will consider how ambiguous and uncertain environments affect cognitive performance. Uncertainty can be regarded as an indicator of the environment's turbulence, exerting a psychological pressure on individuals. Deliberative processes are by nature characterized by uncertainty, associated with both the outcomes and the process (Pellizzoni, 2005). The effects of uncertainty can be twofold. When uncertainty is perceived as an opportunity, it leads individuals to undertake demanding cognitive activities to decode information, facilitates tolerance for ambiguity and exploration, and promotes open-mindedness and divergent thinking. On the contrary, when uncertainty is perceived as a threat, it yields cognitive closure, defensive reactions, and large-scale use of stereotypes. The effects are then ambivalent; studies on social dilemmas have indicated that uncertainty is likely to create a closing of the mind (Biel, 2000). Nevertheless, it is also plausible that in the cases in which people are set in a state of 'multiple perspectives' (Pantaleo 1997; Wicklund, 1999), they are likely to consider uncertainty as a potential source of enrichment for themselves

Framing

In psychological research, the contribution that has highlighted the framing effect is Kahneman and Tversky's (1979) prospect theory, according to which differently framed problems influence how individuals look at them and make a decision. Framing refers to the set of effects generated by the way a problem, an issue, or, in more general terms, information is organized and presented. Since different definitions of frames and framing are available in the literature, we will rely on the classification proposed by Druckman (2002) to distinguish between different meanings of these terms. When they refer to words, images and metaphors used in transmitting information, they are defined as frames in communication. When they refer to the comprehension of information, they are defined as frames in thought. Both these frames are based on the same mechanism, which consists of emphasizing or making more salient some parts of the information provided or received. Communication frames create thought frames, and this process is the framing effect. Which implications can be drawn that might be of use for the analysis of deliberative settings? There is wide consensus that how information is organized and displayed influences decision-making and that no neutrality can be claimed in selecting and presenting information.

Moreover, it has been ascertained that the preference for the status quo can impede negotiation. Such evidence, transferred from the arena of political decision-making, raises the delicate issue of citizen manipulation. One may ask whether such effects are indeed so negative for deliberation. Indeed, a study on value-based frames (Brewer & Gross, 2005) noted that the use of frames does induce people to focalize and narrow their thoughts; nevertheless, using frames does generate a common cognitive structure. So, if on the one hand, framing discourages comprehensive and accurate reasoning, on the other hand it creates shared anchorages to understand and analyze problems, thereby making deliberation more effective. A crucial point that needs to be clarified concerns the systematic nature of framing effects: Do they occur across contexts and populations? According to Druckman (2001; 2002) framing effects are not pervasive; on the contrary, they need specific conditions to occur. One of these conditions is the credibility, reliability and competency of the sources of information, which stand out as requirements for creating framing effects. Druckman's studies also suggest that the equivalence effects are less likely to occur when individuals have sophisticated cognitive skills or are truly motivated, and his work suggests that emphasis effects are not automatic but rather show up after due consideration. Moreover, framing effects can be neutralized by group interaction (Boettcher, 2004).

3.3 Group Dynamics

The deliberative literature has emphasized the role of deliberation in transforming preferences. From a psychological perspective, modifications in opinions and attitudes can be explained on the basis of the potential for change in groups. Moscovici and Doise (1991) state that in order to understand the nature of groups, it is crucial to analyze their ability to transform individuals rather than their capacity for aggregating people. Interaction, indeed, is the main instrument and source of social influence, and its effects can be observed on every board, jury, committee, team or deliberative assembly. Two forms of social influence will be addressed herein, those that seem the most likely to occur in deliberative settings: persuasion and polarization.

Persuasion

Persuasion permeates the whole deliberative process, involving members both as persuaders and targets of persuasive messages. Persuasion is aimed at inducing attitude change, and it is based on arguments and verbal language. The effects of persuasive communication find fertile ground in the tendency of individuals to rely on others for obtaining information. In the 1980s, dual models focused on the recipients' cognitive processes were developed. The elaboration likelihood model by Petty and Cacioppo (1986), as well as the heuristic-systematic model by Chaiken (1980), explained attitude change as a result of two distinct routes for processing information: a central route, encompassing an accurate and scrupulous examination of arguments, and a peripheral route, based on cues related to the characteristics of the source, such as credibility, competence, and attractiveness. According to this model, choosing one pathway or the other depends on motivation, which in turn determines the level of involvement in the issue. The more individuals are supposed to be interested, the more accurately they examine information and analyze alternatives.

When the central route is chosen, the quality of arguments turns out to be a crucial factor for persuasion (Petty, Cacioppo, & Schumann, 1983). More recently, Kruglanski and Thompson (1999) claimed that changing attitude is a one-way process, similar to the formulation of judgment, which is built upon hypotheses according to the if-then scheme. Kruglanski and colleagues also highlighted the distinctive role of the source by introducing the concept of epistemic authority (Kruglanski, Raviv, Bar-Tal, Raviv, Sharvit, Ellis, Bar, Pierro, & Mannetti, 2005). Because people depend on others to obtain information, an epistemic authority is a source that they can rely on to gather information about an object. The rationale for trusting an epistemic authority is its perceived credibility, the assessment of which constitutes the preliminary step of data processing. Credibility serves as a stop signal inducing individuals to seize available information and stop searching. Such a mechanism has been observed in a variety of settings, including deliberative arenas, as a tendency of citizens to trust experts or facilitators more than themselves or their fellow citizens (Pellizzoni, 2006). This concise review suggests not only that are there individuals who are more skilled persuaders than others but also that their efficacy depends on whether they are perceived as credible sources of information.

Polarization

Polarization is a typical group process related to decision-making. If individual choice is driven by cognitive strategies that are at times fast and imprecise, at times accurate and complete, collective decision making has to take into account a set of additional factors, such as: an uneven distribution of knowledge and competencies among members, as well as abilities and power influence; the potential clash between diverging and conflicting goals, values and motivations; and the need for integrating different methods, criteria, and heuristics. According to a widespread point of view, groups experience difficulties in choosing between multiple alternatives, especially when they are confronted with open-ended questions. The point to be addressed is thus the following: What is the relationship between individual opinions and a consensual position expressed by the group? In which direction do opinions change? Polarization refers to the progressive radicalization of members' positions, resulting from collective discussion (Stoner, 1968). Several explanations have been proposed that account for polarization, namely, social comparison processes, persuasive arguments, and self-categorization processes (Brown, 1989). Social comparison and persuasion processes seem to prevail when people do not know each other and have insufficient information, whereas self-categorization is likely to occur when social identity is particularly salient for participants.

According to Isenberg (1986), two factors can explain which of the two processes is likely to occur: the nature of the discussion and the decision, and the level of personal involvement. If the discussion is based on logical arguments and is evidence-based, it is likely that rationality will prevail over social desirability and that persuasion will prevail over social comparison. If, on the contrary, members are intensely involved in the issue, it is likely that social comparison processes are more influential. In the deliberative democracy literature, it has been observed that the risk of polarization increases when individuals perceive similarity with the group's members, cohesion as well as solidarity are high, a sense of the in-group is well developed, and affective relationships are established (Sustein, 2000; 2002; 2005). Such characteristics are likely to reduce the probabilities of dissent and discourage minority standpoints (Mendelberg, 2006). Although recent evidences on deliberative polls (Farrar, Green, Green, Nickerson, & Shewfelt, 2009; Luskin, Fishkin, Jowell, 2002) have questioned the general validity of such assumptions, the risk of group polarization is concrete in many participatory settings. As suggested by Moscovici and Doise (1991), polarization is limited when people are passive, but it becomes stronger as communication becomes intense and involvement increases. The implication then is that the quality and outcomes of deliberation vary according to whether "hot" or "cold" communication styles and patterns are adopted and to the degree to which participants are involved.

4. Discussion

The concise review of personality, cognitive and group variables presented in this paper outlines a brief, and thus incomplete, picture of the psychosocial processes that affect deliberation.

We will now briefly summarize the contents presented. (a) Individual differences do exist among group members, depending on different social value orientations (i.e., cooperation, competition, and individualism), high or low need for achieving a stable and secure knowledge (need for cognitive closure), and a pronounced or slight tendency to undertake complex and demanding cognitive tasks (need for cognition). This observation suggests that equality among participants is more apparent than real and thus should be regarded as a strategic pretense. (b) Cognitive processes involved in deliberation, both at the individual and group level, are as imperfect as human rationality: Framing is an example of how the mind can simplify information and use reasoning strategies that can create stereotyped and biased knowledge. (c) Cognitive conflict and multiplicity are the key ideas in collective learning stemming from deliberation. Individuals form their opinions and mental images in social interaction, comparing their own judgment to that of others and even clashing with a variety of positions. A state of mind particularly favorable to this process is the one described by multiple perspectives theory.

When this psychological condition is present, discussion is fruitful, and participants are willing to accept diversity and tolerate ambiguity, without raising cognitive barriers or showing defensive reactions. (d) Interaction, which lies at the heart of preference change, is also the basis of social influence, manifesting itself in persuasive communication and polarization. Persuasion permeates the whole process of deliberation, involving participants in the twofold role of persuaders and persuadees. In effective persuasion, two main processes play a key role, namely, the ability of targets to process the data provided and the tendency to rely on others as credible sources of information. Polarization, typical of group decision-making, thematizes the relationship between individual opinions and consensual opinions generated by group discussion. The issues that have been addressed constitute a preliminary attempt to outline the main conceptual coordinates that can guide the analysis of public involvement practices. Indeed, given the role of public participation in sustaining virtuous development processes, it seems important that researchers, institutions, and social workers acquire complete knowledge of the functioning of individuals and groups involved in public participation.

This knowledge could prevent citizens who take part in consultative arenas from experiencing exclusion, dominance, and confusion. It is also worth noticing that if citizens perceive their own involvement as a stressful experience or are dissatisfied with the outcomes, then they might tend to withdraw into private life. Such a consequence might in turn result in damage for the enlarged community, undermining social trust and reducing the sense of personal and collective political efficacy. The issues addressed in this paper highlight that the design and management of public involvement settings need to take into account the possibility that a variety of psychosocial processes are likely to affect the quality and the outcomes of deliberation, as well as the subjective experience of participants. Among these processes, the relationship among individuals, their personalities, and the group stands out as the central device for generating preference change, but also as a potential source of cognitive distortions and social inequality.

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