

The Social Context of Public Deliberation: Letting Practice Shape Theory

Toward a Sociology of Deliberation¹
by David M. Ryfe

Reviewed by Carolyn M. Hendriks

Too often public deliberation is studied and theorized as a discrete isolated process. It is refreshing therefore to see more attempts to situate deliberation in its socio-political context. One such piece is David M. Ryfe's contribution to *Journal of Public Deliberation* (2007) in which he considers the "sociological dimensions of deliberative practice" (p. 1) and in doing so makes a "step toward a more explicit sociology of deliberation" (p. 2). Here I review Ryfe's ideas not as a sociologist but as a deliberative democrat working on the interface between practice and theory.

Ryfe draws on Pierre Bourdieu's field theory of society and introduces deliberative democrats to his vocabulary of society. We learn that social space is composed of different forms of *capital* (economic, political, cultural, social and symbolic and so on), which individuals possess to varying degrees. Around particular kinds of capital, social *fields* form which are conceptualised as a set of forces. Fields provide actors with capacities and socialize actors by providing them with "a sense of the game" - or *habitus*.

Ryfe argues that these Bourdieuan concepts help to place deliberative practice in "its proper light" (p. 7). He draws out two particular insights from this theory. First, he argues that deliberative practice is fundamentally a political activity, because it presents a particular view of public life that competes with existing social visions. The political work that deliberation entails has been expressed elsewhere in terms of competing political norms and expectations (Young, 2001), discourses (Dryzek, 2000) or strategic interests (Hendriks, 2006a). Ryfe's application of Bourdieu's theory to deliberative practice serves as a useful reminder that its advocates are engaged in a political process as they seek to promote a particular inclusive and dialogical vision of public life.

¹ Ryfe, D. M. (2007). Toward a sociology of deliberation. *Journal of Public Deliberation* (3) 1, Article 3.

The second message Ryfe takes from Bourdieu's work is the idea that deliberative practice does not yet constitute a defined social field where the "game" is organized. The endeavour, he argues, lacks the "cohesiveness of an autonomous social field" (p. 23) and therefore lacks a shared sense of practice or *habitus*. The implication of this, Ryfe contends, is that deliberative practitioners struggle to come to a shared meaning on what deliberation is, its purpose, how it should be enacted and evaluated. Drawing on illustrations from his observation of the Community Conversations Project (an open ended procedure aimed at improving public life) he claims that (p. 16) "even for a group of people who worked for 20 months to find common ground on these basic issues, a shared conception of deliberation slipped their grasp".

Given that theorists are unable to settle on a common definition of deliberation, why should this insight surprise us? What Ryfe draws attention to here is the work involved by actors in negotiating the meaning and practice of deliberation. This is a valuable insight but one that is possibly limited to those kinds of deliberative practice where procedural matters are open and the remit broad. I would argue that in many instances deliberative practice is characterised by clear rules of the game that are set down (often implicitly) by a particular procedural design operating in a limited political window.

Ryfe takes these two 'social facts' (p. 10) – that deliberation involves political struggle and that deliberative practice lacks a cohesive social field with shared meanings – and posits them as two horns of a 'dilemma'. As he sees it 'the dilemma' is that (p. 3) "advocates of deliberation often wage political battles of the most basic kind without a shared understanding of what they are doing and why they are doing it." This seems more like a curiosity or even an irony than a dilemma - in the sense of two contradictory choices.

But my concern here is more fundamental than the linguistic labels; rather my review questions some of the underlying assumptions in Ryfe's sociological interpretation of deliberative practice. At the centre of Ryfe's diagnosis is the assumption that the political work of deliberation is somehow in competition with the practical task of finding shared deliberative meanings. Either deliberative practice is occupied with the "deep entanglement in the political field, or its immersion in other ongoing social fields." (p. 23) While Ryfe believes that this tension makes deliberative practice dynamic he is concerned that the two tasks do not easily co-exist - hence his label 'the dilemma'. As he sees it (p. 18), "[j]uggling the politics of deliberation at the same time as the identity and purpose of deliberation is a difficult task, to say the least".

On a very practical level there may well be tensions between the tasks of driving a deliberative project and ensuring that the team is working on a common message (for example, to foster deliberation). However, conceptually I do not see these two projects as necessarily in opposition. Often much of the political work involved in deliberative practice is opening up conversations about public deliberation and its meaning. Deliberation is a social construct that finds meaning in social practices. These will vary between contexts, cultures and over time.

To manage 'the dilemma' Ryfe seems to suggest that a shared understanding of deliberation is necessary to promote and foster the political project of deliberative democracy. In other words, for deliberative practitioners to effectively fulfil their political activities they need to settle on common understandings and form an autonomous social field. However, it is certainly questionable whether a cohesive set of practices with shared definitions is desirable, particularly if it homogenises or restricts our capacity to consider diverse forms of public deliberation. Emerging empirical studies of deliberative practitioners suggest that their communities of practice are especially vulnerable in this respect (see Lee, 2007; Hendriks & Carson, 2008).

While Ryfe's theoretical assumptions deserve more scrutiny, the strength of his sociological contribution lies in his empirical insights. His piece shifts our attention away from procedural concerns towards the political and cultural practices of deliberation. Using examples, we are reminded of the political agency involved in promoting deliberative processes. Ryfe sheds light on the importance of deliberative champions, i.e., those who are willing to challenge their own institutional norms and paradigms (social field) to experiment with deliberative processes. His illustrations also demonstrate the internal struggles practitioners face in more open procedures that take place over a long time frame, particularly in sustaining political commitment.

Ryfe's piece also serves as a caution for some of the dangers we face in drawing broader conclusions about 'deliberative practice'. Ryfe's analysis concentrates on two particular kinds of deliberative initiatives: those with the long term and broad goal of "aspiring to transform public life" and those that "push forward a particular agency's agenda" (p.10). This seems to neglect a host of other (arguably more popular) deliberative initiatives such as those aimed at eliciting considered public input for collective decisions (see Fung, 2003; Carson, 2008). His empirical analysis also focuses on advocates and organisers of deliberative initiatives, and thus neglects other significant actors of deliberation such as its participants, evaluators and decision makers.

Given the limited deliberative initiatives and actors under consideration, Ryfe's goal of moving "toward a sociology of deliberation" seems a distant ambition indeed.

Is the pursuit of an explicit sociological theory of deliberation possible or even desirable? If we understand public deliberation as a diverse activity that takes place in many informal and formal arenas (Mansbridge, 1999; Parkinson, 2007), then finding one grand theory that can encapsulate this diversity is a tall order. It is unlikely that the one sociological theory can predict (or even estimate) the behaviour of advocates and participants of deliberation (which seems to be Ryfe's aspiration, p. 10). The motivations and deliberative conditions are so vastly different, for example, between a structured deliberative poll and the informalities of 'everyday talk' (Conover & Searing, 1999). Squeezing deliberative practice into a given sociological theory seems also undesirable if we want to foster a deliberative system that is as heterogeneous and inclusive as possible (Hendriks, 2006b). On the other hand, one of the most useful contributions that sociological theory can offer deliberative democracy is helping us interpret our empirical observations. That is, its value lies in offering explanatory and descriptive contributions rather than predictive ones. Better still, we should encourage more inductive forms of empirical research where deliberative practice serves to inform and shape theory rather than the other way around.

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