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For more Transparency in Deliberative Research. Implications for Deliberative Praxis

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Abstract

Coding decisions in deliberative research are almost never justified. We show with our own research how transparency in the coding decisions helps deliberate practitioners better to relate to deliberate research and in this way to acquire deliberative skills.

Author Biography

All four of us are co-authors of *Deliberation across Deeply Divided Societies*, Cambridge University Press, 2017.

Keywords

transparency, deliberative praxis, website with qualitative data

Deliberation is an extremely complex phenomenon. Even if it is broken down in its various elements, complexity remains very high. It is very difficult, for example, to establish in a fully reliable and valid way how much actors respect the arguments of others, how well arguments are justified, or how relevant personal stories are for the topic under discussion. For the scholarly community to be able to judge the quality of deliberative research, the coding of the various deliberative elements must be transparent. It is certainly not enough just to report the individual coding decisions; we also need to know in detail how these coding decisions came about. As far as we see, the *justification* of coding decisions is virtually never systematically made transparent. In our earlier research on deliberation, we also neglected to make our coding decisions transparent. When in our research group, we developed and applied the Discourse Quality Index (DQI) to parliamentary debates, we certainly justified the coding decisions among ourselves but omitted to make these justifications public (Steiner et al, 2005).

In our current research, we now make every effort to establish full transparency (Steiner et al, 2017). We have studied discussion groups of ex-guerrillas and ex-paramilitaries in Colombia, of police officers and locals in favelas of Brazil, and of Serbs and Bosnjaks in Srebrenica. The topic in all groups was of how to establish a better culture of peace. Theoretically, we were interested in the internal dynamics of the discussions, specifically the ups and downs in the level of deliberation. Using the concept of Deliberative Transformative Moments (DTM), we coded each speech act according to four coding categories. If the discussion was at a high level of deliberation, the coding decision was whether it stayed at this high level or was transformed to a low level. Vice-versa, if the discussion was at a low level of deliberation, the coders had to decide whether it stayed at this low level or was transformed to a high level. In our research group, we reached a high level of inter-coder reliability, which, however, does not establish in any definite way the validity of our analysis. Given the complexity of deliberation, each coding decision was ultimately a subjective judgment call. The fact that we had much agreements in these judgment calls, may only mean that in our research group we had developed similar views of what is a high or low level of deliberation. Therefore, colleagues in the deliberative community should have a good basis to judge to what extent they agree with our coding decisions. Some colleagues may have a different notion, for example, of what they understand by respect and thus may come to a different interpretation of the corresponding data. We welcome such pluralism in how the data are interpreted. As deliberative scholars, after all, we should be willing to deliberate over deliberative issues.

How did we establish transparency of our research? The answer can be found on the following website at the University of Bern:

www.ipw.unibe.ch/content/research/deliberation. Here one finds the audio-records, the transcripts and the English translations of the discussion groups in all three countries. Most importantly, the coding decisions of all the speech acts are justified in a qualitative way at some length; we do this not in the original languages but in English to give the widest possible access. We illustrate these coding decisions with an upward Deliberative Transformative Moment, as it occurred in the second group of ex-guerrillas and ex-paramilitaries in Colombia (pages 38-39 of website). Immediately before the upward Deliberative Transformative Moment took place, ex-guerrilla Arturo spoke up as follows:

Ex-guerrilla Arturo: I can provide an explanation for that. Stratification is an administrative and juridical figure. Because it is not fair that we all pay the same. That is why it is an administrative figure. Socially, it is the discrimination we are subjected to. There are neighborhoods in the northern part of Bogota –most affluent ones- where the streets are closed. Then I am not a person, I am not a citizen, I am not a human being, I am not Bogotan, though I am not from Bogotá, I am Colombian.

We gave to this speech act code 3, which meant that Arturo kept the discussion at a low level of deliberation. On our website, one finds the following justification for this coding decision.

Justification of code 3 for ex-guerrilla Arturo: Arturo is keeping the level of deliberation low, as he seems to have lost track of the main subject of the discussion. He seems to just want the attention of others. He doesn't let Fernanda (previous speaker) finish her intervention and steps in to provide an explanation of what stratification means. As we know, interrupting is contrary to the deliberative spirit and so is the monopolizing of the discussion. He does refer briefly to the issue of social discrimination that is certainly linked to the recurring theme of stratification, but does it in a way that is not moving the discourse forward.

After Arturo, it is ex-paramilitary Ernesto who speaks up:

Ex-paramilitary Ernesto: That is one of the things I used to say when I was young, I said if I am Colombian, I am able to go everywhere I want. Later, when I started to live the conflict, I realized that there were places where people would tell you "go", "go away from here, we don't know you". You knew that you were in danger. When I came to Bogota, I was with a cousin and a friend of mine in one of the northern and wealthy neighborhoods, we were kind of lost. Then the police came, at first they asked us what we were doing; as my friend couldn't respond, at the end police said they didn't want to see us around anymore, as neighbors had called to let them know that there were some strange and suspicious people and they didn't want you here. Stratification, as he (Arturo) says, is indeed something legal, juridical, and it does refer to the fact that

some people can't afford to pay the same as others-. What I feel is what you (Arturo) said about stratification is more than levels 1, 2 or 3, it is the discrimination that is the hard thing.

Our interpretation was that this speech act got the code 4, which meant an upward Deliberative Transformative Moment. Our website gives the following justification for this coding decision:

Justification of code 4 for ex-paramilitary Ernesto: This story of Ernesto is relevant for a discussion among ex-combatants about the peace process in Colombia. Ernesto begins the story with his optimistic expectation that when he was young he could go anywhere in the country. He felt that as a Colombian he was not discriminated. Ernesto then continues that later in life in the context of the civil war he had to learn that unfortunately discrimination existed in Colombia and that he encountered this at a very personal level. He illustrates this claim with a story about a bad experience that he had in a wealthy neighborhood in Bogota. Because he, his cousin and his friend looked suspicious, wealthy neighbors called the police to chase them away. Ernesto characterizes this episode as putting them in danger, because they were anxious not knowing what the police would do with them. This story is relevant for the peace process, because Ernesto can show to the other participants that there are huge social and economic inequalities in Colombian society. More specifically, he can show how ex-combatants in particular suffer under these inequalities. Through his story, Ernesto tells the other participants that these inequalities are not just a legal concept with abstract levels on a scale like 1, 2, 3, but something that is revealed in everyday life as real discrimination. Ernesto does not explicitly link such discrimination to the ongoing civil war, but he tells his story in such vivid terms that it is implicitly clear that such inequalities are a major obstacle on the way to peace. Discrimination of ex-combatants is particularly damaging for the peace process, because their successful reintegration into society is a key pillar of the governmental peace plan. If ex-combatants are dissatisfied with their situation, they may go back to fight in the jungle, as many have already done. All this shows that the story of Ernesto touched an important nerve in the peace process. His story helps to make the argument that discrimination of the ex-combatants and more generally of the large masses of poor people has to be overcome if there is any chance for peace.

After Ernesto spoke, the discussion remained interactive with ex-paramilitary Bernardo staying on the topic of discrimination. We gave him code 1, which meant that he kept the discussion at a high level of deliberation:

Ex-paramilitary Bernardo: My case was in Cartagena, in a neighborhood like the north here in Bogotá, where a group of demobilized had been placed, people started to appear in the news, stating they wanted us out because their kids were in danger.

The justification of code 1 for Bernardo reads as follows:

Justification of code 1 for Bernardo: Bernardo interactively acknowledges Ernesto's argument about discrimination against demobilized people, and without unnecessarily belaboring on this point, he offers his own personal story in Cartagena as a vivid example of it. By doing so, he keeps up the high level of deliberation.

We have now taken three coding decisions from our website, an upward Deliberative Transformative Moment, and the speech acts immediately before and afterwards. Despite all our efforts to make these decisions very carefully, the four of us in our research group are fully aware that the decisions are ultimately subjective, mirroring what we understand by deliberation. By making our coding decisions open to the public, however, others are invited to replicate our analyses with the same material. Some may come to the conclusion, for example, that Arturo was clear enough in how he spoke and sufficiently talked about discrimination of the ex-combatants that it was already he and not Ernesto who transformed the discussion back to a high level of deliberation. They may also debate whether Ernesto was clear enough when he said that stratification is more than levels 1, 2 or 3. He seems to mean that stratification is not simply a sociological concept that can be measured by objective levels but something much more significant in the real life of people at the bottom. Did this reference of Ernesto help the discussion about discrimination, or was the reference so unclear that it was, on the contrary, a distraction. This is a good example where practitioners working with our website may come to different conclusions.

Making coding transparent is not only useful for other scholars but also for *practitioners* of deliberation. They can use our website to develop deliberative skills. Thereby, our coding decisions should not be taken as absolute truth but as something open for intelligent discussion. To take the upward Deliberative Transformative Moment presented above, practitioners can discuss whether the story told by Ernesto really had the potential to bring back the discussion to a higher level of deliberation. Thereby, they can learn that the deliberative potential depends very much on the context. Not every story of people being chased away by the police is helpful for deliberation. So why was the story of

Ernesto helpful? Or perhaps it was not helpful after all? Was the story really relevant to reveal discrimination against ex-combatants? Perhaps the wealthy neighbors in Bogota did not even know that Ernesto and his friends were ex-combatants but were suspicious that they were burglars, so that had a right to call the police. Deliberative practitioners can easily spend a good amount of time to deal with the deliberative potential of the story of Ernesto. Learning from real life cases is better than to learn from abstract texts; this is particularly true for deliberation, where many texts are at a very high abstract-philosophical level.

Using the website of our research has the special advantage that deliberate practitioners have teaching material from which they can learn about the internal dynamic of group discussions and the conditions under which the level of deliberation goes up or down. As we have seen with the example from Bogota, one can learn how personal stories may or may not contribute to good deliberation. From other parts of our website, people who are interested to apply deliberation in the praxis can learn how humor is often able to transform a discussion back to a high level of deliberation, because it serves as lubricant and breaks the ice. There are also cases on our website where sarcasm disrupted a discussion bringing deliberation to an end. In studying cases of humor and sarcasm, practitioners can become aware that there is a fine line between the two and that this line depends on the context. One and the same joke may help deliberation in one context, but may be detrimental in another context. In this way, practitioners become familiar with the subtleties of deliberation. One and the same word may have different meanings depending on the context.

Our website also gives insights how rational arguments impact on deliberation. Although giving reasons for one's arguments is generally good for deliberation, high complexity of rationality presented at great length may easily be perceived as intellectually arrogant, derailing the flow of deliberation. This happened in the third discussion group in a favela of Brazil, when a police officer spoke for full nine minutes, lecturing the locals with complex reasons how to attain a better culture of peace. The local participants were at a loss of how to react to his lecturing, so that discussion lost its direction. Here again, all depends on the context; the same set of reasons may work in one context but not in another. Studying such cases from our website will give good hints of how to apply rationality in deliberative praxis.

Still another lesson from our website is that sometimes ignoring a rude and offensive statement may be a good tactic that the flow of deliberation can be kept up. An example is from the fourth group in Colombia where an ex-paramilitary made the rude statement that their side was justified to cleanse the guerrillas because they were cattle thieves and rapists. The ex-guerrillas in the

group did ignore this statement and continued the flow of deliberation as if nothing offensive would have been said. The ex-paramilitary did not insist that his statement be addressed and became even cooperative later in the discussion. This is a positive example of how ignoring a rude statement can prevent that the flow of deliberation is derailed. Readers of our website, however, will also find cases where ignoring the statement of others had negative effects on the level of deliberation. Here again, many lessons can be drawn for the praxis of deliberation.

Now let us imagine a group of deliberative practitioners in front of our website, debating various sequences of the group discussions of ex-guerrillas and ex-paramilitaries in Colombia, police officers and locals in favelas of Brazil and Serbs and Bosnjaks in Srebrenica. These practitioners can study how we have coded the ups and downs in the group discussions and how we have justified our coding decisions. Addressing the merits of our coding can be a stimulating enterprise. Thereby, the practitioners do not only *study* deliberation, but they can become *self-aware* at what level of deliberation they discuss among themselves. Drawing lessons from their own behavior, practitioners can learn how to bring a discussion back to a high level of deliberation and to prevent deliberation from being disrupted again. If this works successfully, moderators can become less and less active and leave it to the groups to keep discussions at a high level of deliberation for long stretches. Such self-organization of discussion groups corresponds better to the spirit of deliberation than when moderators act as teachers, constantly reminding participants of how to behave. In this way, learning from the material of our website strengthens the autonomy of participants in group discussions to find their own ways to good deliberation. After all, a key criterion of deliberation is unconstrained participation of all.

Considering this criterion, it is better when participants in group discussions are themselves responsible to keep deliberation high. Our website shows cases where deliberative leaders emerged, encouraging a more deliberative tone. An example is ex-guerrilla Ana in the fourth discussion group in Colombia, where she urged participants from both sides, “in order to reach agreement we need to be able to talk in a civilized way, just like human beings.” Such interventions from within the groups themselves are more in a deliberative spirit than corresponding interventions by the moderators. People have to learn to deliberate without constant interventions from the outside. We have also found deliberative spoilers, who did not stop to disrupt the flow of deliberation with sarcasm, off-topic remarks, and confusing statements. For deliberate practitioners, it will be a challenging task to look at such cases at our website and to find out ways, so that such spoilers are less disruptive. Not an easy task!

In our research group, we turn ourselves to deliberative praxis. What we have described above in general terms, we apply specifically to schools of Colombia, Brazil, and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Steiner et al, 2017). Deliberate skills can be learned like any other skills, and the earlier this is done the better. We begin with this teaching already at 5th grade and continue to college level. For the teaching of deliberative skills, it is important that teachers become familiar with the deliberative literature. In their actual teaching, however, they do not begin with the abstract presentation of the deliberative model, but they lead the students on our website through the discussion groups of their own country. Thereby, the pedagogical principle is followed that students meet first in small groups, who then report their conclusions to the full class, where the discussion continues. Working with control groups, we examine how successful this kind of teaching is.

In this paper, we tried to reflect how deliberative praxis gets better access to deliberative scholarship. Our argument is that deliberate scholars should make their research more transparent in making their raw data public. If they show in their publications only their coding data without revealing the justifications for their coding decisions, deliberative practitioners find it hard to get a feeling of what is contained in the data and the tables and figures built on these data. Deliberate scholars should not only show the end products of their work but also the *narratives* of how they got to these end products. What we argue here is valid for all scholarship including, for example, research on climate change and immigration: practitioners understand scholarship much better when it is not only presented in tables and figures but in vivid narratives. With regard to deliberation, scholars should not only think about their professional publications but also on the use of their work for the deliberative praxis. Ultimately, there is the normative-philosophical goal behind deliberative research that in the political praxis not only power should count but also the force of the better argument. To implement this goal, scholars need the support of practitioners, who do the work on the ground in the daily praxis.

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