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## **A Conceptual Definition and Theoretical Model of Public Deliberation in Small Face-to- Face Groups**

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*Although scholars have begun to study face-to-face deliberation on public issues, “deliberation” has no clear conceptual definition and only weak moorings in larger theories. To address these problems, this essay integrates diverse philosophical and empirical works to define deliberation and place it in a broader theoretical context. Public deliberation is a combination of careful problem analysis and an egalitarian process in which participants have adequate speaking opportunities and engage in attentive listening or dialogue that bridges divergent ways of speaking and knowing. Placed in the meta-theoretical framework of structuration theory (Giddens, 1984), deliberation is theorized to exist at the center of a homeostatic loop, in which deliberative practice reinforces itself. A review of theory and research on the causes and effects of deliberation leads us to develop this structural conceptualization into the self-reinforcing model of deliberation. This model posits that public deliberation is more likely to occur when discussion participants perceive potential common ground, believe deliberation is an appropriate mode of talk, possess requisite analytic and communication skills, and have sufficient motivation. Deliberation directly reinforces participants’ deliberative habits and skills, and it indirectly promotes common ground and motivation by broadening participants’ public identities and heightening their sense of political efficacy.*

In the past 10 years, deliberation has been the focus of research in many fields, including communication (Gastil, 1993; McLeod et al., 1999; Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997), public opinion (Page, 1996), and political philosophy (Bohman, 1996; Cohen, 1997; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996). Complementing these academic uses of the term, deliberation has become central to the philosophy of many modern public discussion programs, such as citizen juries (Crosby, 1995; Smith & Wales, 1999), study circles and issues forums (Gastil & Dillard, 1999a; Mathews, 1994), the National Issues Convention (Fishkin & Luskin, 1999), and other programs (Button & Mattson, 1999; Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997; Ryfe, 1999). Although use of the term has become widespread, deliberation lacks a coherent conceptual definition. In addition, there has

been no systematic attempt to place deliberation within a larger meta-theoretical framework, or even to create a lower-level model that identifies its likely antecedents and consequences.

The dangers of conceptual imprecision and insufficient theoretical grounding are myriad (Chaffee, 1991). Theoretical ambiguity can lead to incommensurate works on what theorists presume to be the same subject. Thus, theorists loosely define deliberation to encompass the legislative process in the United States (Bessette, 1994), an unrealized form of citizen politics (Barber, 1984), or even existing media practices (Page, 1996). The effects of deliberation are also difficult to research because the process itself is undefined. Due to this problem, previous studies have been reduced to operationalizing deliberation as a dichotomous variable that is assumed to be present during any public discussion, issues forum, or town meeting that has a format permitting structured interaction among the participants (Denver, Hands, & Jones, 1995; Fishkin & Luskin, 1999; Gastil & Dillard, 1999b; McLeod et al., 1999). Such a simple conception is inadequate. Communication scholars need to learn how the deliberative process differs from other conceptual cousins, such as cooperative argumentation (Makau & Marty, 2001), dialogue (Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997), debate (Tannen, 1998), discussion (Gouran & Hirokawa, 1996), protest (Meyers & Brashers, 2002), and ideal speech (Habermas, 1984).

Deliberation also remains difficult to investigate empirically because of the unspecified assumptions and vague hypotheses advanced by its chief advocates (Barber, 1984; Cohen, 1997; Fishkin, 1995; Habermas, 1984; Mathews, 1994). Many theorists have written at a level of abstraction that requires only a general understanding of the term, and this has permitted the avoidance of precise conceptual definition. One consequence of this approach is confusion about what constitutes deliberation, as opposed to what sparks or emanates from it. As Haas (1999) explains, "In many instances the boundaries between the process and outcome of public deliberation have been blurred rather than distinct" (p. 355). Without a clear definition and set of theoretical claims, deliberation has limited value as a subject of sustained empirical investigation.

Our aim is to move toward a deeper theoretical understanding of deliberation by drawing on a diversity of literatures and experiences. After developing a conceptual definition of deliberation, we explore the conditions that are likely to promote deliberation, as well as the probable consequences of engaging in deliberative discussion.

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### **Defining Deliberation**

We begin by qualifying the scope of our model of deliberation. There are many forms of deliberation, and we wish to discuss a particular

practice of deliberation common to civic education programs and policy-oriented forums in the United States, such as citizen juries (Button & Mattson, 1999; Ryfe, 1999). Since our primary interest is in the content and process of these deliberative discussions, we narrow our focus to the face-to-face interactions that take place during public meetings.

### **The Scope of the Definition**

Our definition is limited to democratic forms of deliberation. Many writers presume that deliberation is inherently democratic (Mathews, 1994; Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997), whereas others make this connection explicit by using terms such as “democratic deliberation” (Barge, 2002; Gastil, 2000) or “deliberative democracy” (Button & Mattson, 1999; Cohen, 1997; Warren, 1996a). Given the common linkage of these words, we believe that focusing on democratic deliberation does not make our definition unduly restrictive; rather, it makes clear what has been implicit or ambiguous in past writings. For economy of presentation, however, we commonly refer to deliberation without the “democratic” modifier.

Part of the challenge of constructing a more precise definition of democratic deliberation is that most political theorists consider democracy to be an unattainable ideal. Because true democratic character is difficult to obtain, describing an entity as fully democratic confers tremendous legitimacy on it (Skinner, 1973). The political theorist Robert Dahl (1989) and others have defined democracy as something that nations can reach only by degrees.<sup>1</sup> Gastil (1993) used a similar approach to describe small group democracy, saying that groups can overcome the obstacles to democracy only “during brief, brilliant flashes” that last a few minutes, or perhaps an hour (p. 123). Thus, the definition constructed here will prove to be very demanding to implement in practice. In more concrete terms, if one created a perfect measurement scale using our definition of deliberation, individual group meetings would rarely receive the highest possible deliberation score, although there would be ample variance in scores below that point.

Another limit on the scope of our definition is its focus on face-to-face deliberation in small groups. A group discussion needs at least three participants. Communication theorists normally categorize two participants having a conversation as a dyad, not a group. Although some might say that a lone individual can deliberate internally through a form of intrapersonal communication (Goodin, 2000), we focus on talk within a group of individuals. The face-to-face requirement means that our definition refers to groups of manageable size in which participants can see and hear one another. Our conceptual definition might apply to other settings, such as on-line forums, but we choose to focus on face-to-face settings for two distinct reasons. First, since most modern ex-

periments in public deliberation have taken place in face-to-face settings (Ryfe, 1999), a definition similarly constrained will better correspond to common practice. Second, our definition is grounded in structuration theory (Giddens, 1984), which emphasizes the special role of face-to-face communication in the reproduction of social structures, including deliberative norms.

We also address only political or public deliberation, which means that the topic of discussion must be an issue that affects many people.<sup>2</sup> Political deliberation tends to focus on either policy issues, which are defined as problems that may be addressed through some form of government action (Warren, 1992), or problems of collective action, which require the coordination of many people's actions (Mathews, 1994). Public deliberation can also concern moral and cultural conflicts that have no clear policy solutions (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996; Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997).

Finally, our definition applies to public meetings and forums that have relatively tight spatial and temporal constraints. We seek to create a definition that facilitates the measurement of deliberation at a specific time (typically over a period between one hour and one week) and in a specific place (where a group physically meets, such as a room or a building). We do not wish to challenge the wisdom of the bona fide group perspective (Putnam & Stohl, 1990), which underscores that fact that most face-to-face groups have permeable boundaries, shifting member roles, and interdependence with their larger contexts. Nevertheless, we focus on public forums and citizen juries (Button & Mattson, 1999; Crosby, 1995; Ryfe, 1999), which have relatively little history, last for short periods of time, and exist primarily in the formal setting of a meeting room or conference center. In the larger population of small groups, these deliberative forums are unusual specimens, but they are a vital form of citizen deliberation in large-scale political systems (Fishkin, 1995; Gastil, 2000).

### **Careful Weighing**

Within this limited scope, it is possible to begin defining the deliberative process. For many writers, public deliberation means "to weigh carefully both the consequences of various options for action and the views of others" (Mathews, 1994, p. 110). Despite different orientations and emphases, many writers have defined deliberation in similar terms (e.g., Barber, 1984; Fishkin, 1991; Gastil, 1993; Page, 1996). Thus, we begin by clarifying the meaning of the "careful weighing" that is at the heart of most definitions of deliberation.

Stated in precise language, deliberation is characterized by the performance of a set of communicative behaviors that promote thorough group discussion. Gouran and Hirokawa (1996) developed such a model of

group deliberation, which they call the functional theory of group decision making. In this view, a group is more likely to make a logical, reasoned, and informed decision if its members analyze the nature of the problem at hand, identify a range of possible solutions, and establish evaluative criteria which are then used to judge the merits of each solution.<sup>3</sup>

Lest these functions sound too abstract, we clarify each in the context of a political discussion. In particular, we recognize the need to conceptualize communication functions as more than just formal reasoned argument (Stohl & Holmes, 1993). Even our understanding of the term argument is broad and approximates the diverse modes of expression that Meyers and Brashers (2002) call “arguments-in-use.” We also specify features of the deliberative process that go beyond communication functions, but before describing these, it is necessary to discuss the communication functions themselves.

**Information.** A discussion is more deliberative if it incorporates accurate knowledge of relevant information (Gouran & Hirokawa, 1996). The accuracy of contested empirical claims, however, must be negotiated by group members who may vary in their perceptions of the information’s authoritative backing (Habermas, 1984; Warren, 1996a). Deliberation further entails the development of a clear understanding of different (especially conflicting) stakeholder interests and experiences.<sup>4</sup>

We stress that personal experience with an issue is a valid form of information on which to base deliberative claims. As Herbst (1995) points out, rationalistic accounts of public voice and deliberation (e.g., Habermas, 1984) implicitly privilege impersonal information, such as survey data, objective measurements, and statistics, because these forms of data transcend an individual’s personal biases. A broader conception of authoritative public voice, however, should include bearing witness (Barber, 1984) or offering personal testimony (Mansbridge, 1990; Sanders, 1997).

One example of personal testimony comes from the 1996 National Issues Convention (NIC), which one of the authors of this article witnessed. The NIC brought a random sample of over 400 United States citizens together to discuss current issues in face-to-face small groups. During one group discussion on the modern family, criticisms of welfare recipients prompted a participant to tell a tearful personal story about why she accepted welfare payments. Her doctor had diagnosed her cancer as terminal, and she expected to live only two more years. She had an infant daughter, and she had decided to spend the rest of her life raising her young child rather than working until death. Her emotional self-disclosure held the group’s attention, but it also made a substantive contribution to the group’s information base.

**Range of Solutions.** A discussion is more deliberative if it takes into account a broad range of perspectives on an issue. At minimum, a group

must consider two distinct approaches to a problem, but it should also strive to consider views across the political spectrum, especially those not held by its own membership. Following John Stuart Mill's (1972) conception of deliberation within a representative assembly, deliberation should attempt to incorporate the full spectrum of views on the public good (Fishkin, 1995).

Beyond the inclusion of a wide range of preexisting views, groups engaged in deliberation should also try to identify innovative solutions that meet diverse interests to a greater degree than do the current set of alternatives. Participants in fully deliberative events can find new alternatives even when presented with a premade set of policy options. For example, when the University of New Mexico Institute for Public Policy convened citizen conferences on long-range transportation planning in 1997, the Institute outlined three ways to spend the state's highway budget (Gastil, 2000). Although the citizens participating in these conferences always chose among those options, they also looked beyond them. For instance, citizens recommended that the State of New Mexico enlarge the road fund by increasing revenues (e.g., an increase in the gasoline tax) or by permitting the Highway Department to buy goods and services without paying gross receipt taxes.

**Evaluative Criteria.** In deliberative forums, tentative statements for and against policy solutions may be emotional or self-interested, but ultimately, arguments need to link back to evaluative criteria that are broadly, if not universally, shared. As discussed in more detail below, a definitive public interest—that which Rousseau (1950) called the “general will”—often does not exist. In public deliberation, participants' arguments sometimes directly appeal to a common good, but at other times they can appeal to a conception of the good that is shared by members of a subpublic (Benhabib, 1992). In either case, individual participants should take into account the goals or values of persons unlike themselves. When a deliberative group cannot agree on a set of evaluative criteria, participants need to make their own criteria explicit. This can help participants recognize conflicts in values both within and across stakeholder groups.

In the groups that we have witnessed, discussions often do not address evaluative criteria directly. This is problematic because such criteria determine how participants evaluate solutions. Following Pearce and Littlejohn's (1997) work on moral disputes, it is likely that evaluative criteria are not discussed either because participants share a similar, unacknowledged set of underlying values or because they do not wish to acknowledge explicitly that they lack such common understandings. Without specific discussion of evaluative criteria, people will assume common values, which has the effect of silencing potential differences. Additionally, when moral conflict erupts, people may find it difficult to engage in meaningful deliberation.

For example, a debate on abortion included this exchange: “The bottom line is that killing children is not what America is all about. We are not here to destroy our offspring,” to which the other party replied, “Well, we are also not here to have the government use women’s bodies as the instrument of the state, to force women into involuntary servitude” (Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997, p. 71). The first participant in the exchange bases the discussion on the premise that abortion is morally abhorrent because it is “killing children.” For the second participant, prohibiting abortion is morally inexcusable because it is tantamount to slavery for women. Deliberation occurs only if these participants acknowledge the value-conflicts underlying their responses to one another. They may want to resist doing so because it is uncomfortable, but it is only by making explicit the distinct bases of evaluative judgments that the group will understand exactly what is at stake for the participants and what can and cannot be reconciled through deliberation.

**Evaluation of Solutions and Reaching Decisions.** Participants in deliberation also must consistently apply their evaluative criteria to the full range of proposed solutions to determine the impact of different solutions on the goals and interests of diverse stakeholders. In particular, participants should pay attention to value trade-offs between alternative policies, because the heart of deliberation is making hard choices among conflicting alternatives (Mathews, 1994). Returning to the New Mexico citizen conferences, one group of citizens wrote a final recommendation clearly acknowledging the cost associated with its policy recommendation:

The safety improvements we recommend would cost as much as \$40 million a year, and to pay for these projects, the [State Highway] Department should turn 3,000 miles of state highways over to New Mexico counties. . . . Counties may choose to maintain these roads, but the State will no longer be responsible for them.

Deliberative judgments, such as these, recognize that given realistic budgetary constraints, achieving one policy goal may require abandoning other objectives.

Although decision making is often an outcome of deliberation, our definition does not require that every group reach a singular final judgment. Not all deliberative forums require decisions, and in some cases it is inappropriate to make a decision, such as when the group has no authority, when a decision would be premature, or when a group decision would conflict with a larger decision-making process. Groups that do make decisions can be evaluated as relatively deliberative when they choose the solution that best meets their evaluative criteria using a democratic decision rule, such as majority vote, consensus, or proportional outcomes (Gastil, 1993).

Moreover, decisions are “points of touching down,” rather than ends to deliberation, in that they are always embedded in ongoing historical processes (Gadamer, 1990). A decision is not final in that participants may still express their dissent and revisit the issue at an appropriate time (Barber, 1984; Gastil, 1993). In this sense, groups manage an inherent dialectical tension between the needs of openness and closure (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996).

**Communication Functions and Democracy.** It is useful to point out that Gouran and Hirokawa’s (1996) communication functions have a special significance when used to frame our definition of deliberation. In functional theory, communication can promote logical, informed, and reflective decisions; however, in public deliberation it also has a moral purpose. Such ethical implications are not surprising, as the philosophical theories in which we ground our definition are all ethical ideals of democratic self-governance (e.g., Barber, 1984; Dahl, 1989).

First, democratic participants have a moral right to receive necessary and available information, and those who have access to such information have a responsibility to provide it (Gastil, 1993). One cannot expect democratic citizens to govern themselves effectively if they cannot access the diverse data needed to make informed decisions. It is impossible to know a priori what information is relevant, available, or needed, but to the extent that participants themselves identify information as necessary, they should have access to it, particularly if it has been collected by public institutions. Second, the range of possible solutions should be representative of the underlying diversity of interests and views (Dahl, 1989; Fishkin, 1991). Third, to develop evaluative criteria, a deliberative group must take into account the full breadth of moral vantage points in its discussion (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996). Different sets of evaluative criteria may need to be used if irreconcilable moral vantage points make it impossible to produce one set for the group; neglecting to consider a participant’s evaluative criteria is nothing less than ignoring that person’s values. If a discussion group fails to equally apply participants’ different evaluative criteria to the solutions considered, this constitutes more than an analytic lapse; it is unfair to those participants whose values (criteria) received undue attention (Barber, 1984).

In sum, for both analytic and moral purposes, deliberative groups build a strong information base, consider a range of solutions, establish representative evaluative criteria, and apply those criteria equally to all solutions.

### **Participation Rights and Responsibilities**

The features described above are necessary but not sufficient criteria for assessing the deliberative quality of a group’s discussion. Thus far, we have focused on what a group’s discussion accomplishes in terms of information distribution, analysis, and decision making. A comprehensive

definition of deliberation must also encompass behavior of individual participants and the interactions among them. In this section, we consider the rights and responsibilities of deliberative participants.

**Sufficient Opportunity to Speak.** A basic feature of the democratic ideal is the principle of political equality (Dahl, 1989). In large-scale political systems, this means equal access to the public sphere, equal voice in elections, and equal representation in governing bodies. In face-to-face small groups, political equality has a more precise requirement: Each participant in a deliberative group should have adequate opportunities to speak (Gastil, 1993). This means that some people may require more time than others to express their views. It is difficult to second-guess a participant who believes that his or her voice has not been heard, despite equal floor time. That said, when more than one participant requires additional time to speak, and there is not sufficient time to hear each, then the principle of equal speaking time can be used to determine the length of each speaker's turn. The goal is to make everyone's opportunities equally adequate. When time constrains participation to an even greater degree, deliberative groups can emphasize equality of opportunity for different interests rather than individual persons (Mill, 1972). Although equal speaking opportunities are valuable, it is more important that a diversity of views be heard.

**Adequate Comprehension and Consideration.** Even if participants in a deliberative discussion do have equal, or at least sufficient, opportunities to speak, that does not mean that group members necessarily consider or even understand what each individual says. As Hewes (1996) argues, egocentric behavior can create the false appearance of deliberation. Even while ignoring each other, people can carry on a conversation that seems to involve a sincere exchange of ideas. Thus, it is necessary to state explicitly that in a deliberating group, participants need to speak intelligibly so that others may understand them. In addition, participants must consider equally the arguments that others make and avoid reliance on peripheral cues (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) to assess the merits of others' claims.

Different theorists and advocates of deliberation have called this listening process different names, the most common of which may be "mutual respect." Respect embodies the idea that everyone should have both an equal opportunity to participate and an equal opportunity to be heard during deliberation (Fishkin, 1991). As Gutmann and Thompson (1996) define it, mutual respect makes possible "constructive interaction with . . . the persons with whom one disagrees" (p. 81). Ethically, mutual respect incorporates what Benhabib (1992) has called the principle of universal respect (i.e., each participant recognizes the right of all other participants to be part of the conversation, regardless of their charac-

teristics) and the principle of egalitarian reciprocity (i.e., each participant recognizes that all other participants have equal, symmetrical rights to shape the discussion and determine the outcome). Mutual respect is needed in democratic deliberation to establish a social context in which participants are willing to put forth arguments, particularly those that constitute dissent (Fishkin, 1991; Gastil, 1993).

One glimpse of the importance of mutual respect comes from a forum on juvenile violence one of the authors convened in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The forum's atmosphere of honesty and openness engendered careful listening as much as it encouraged vocal participation. During an interview held immediately after the forum, one participant said that she "felt listened to." As she explained, "There was so much respect in the room that it was easy to listen. Because people listened to each other, it was easier to talk, and it was also easier to listen to others."

### **Language, Reasoning, and Dialogue**

To this point, our definition has worked with relatively unproblematic notions of language and knowledge. For a heterogeneous group to deliberate, however, it may need to bring into the discussion not only different viewpoints but also different ways of speaking and reasoning.

Difference is fundamental to public deliberation, but critics have found that this problem is often overlooked in deliberative democratic theory (Benhabib, 1996; Mansbridge, 1990; Sanders, 1997). Speaking style differences are one of the most basic problems facing small groups that seek to make decisions democratically (Gastil, 1993). Public discussions need to accommodate significant differences in speaking and reasoning traditions because they include people with diverse cultural backgrounds (Philipsen, 1992; Warnick & Manusov, 1999; Whorf, 1956). More fundamentally, Pearce and Littlejohn (1997) point out that public deliberation on moral issues must confront the problem of "incommensurate moral orders" when participants differ in "how they view being, knowledge, and values" (p. 51). This goes beyond our earlier discussion of considering different values and viewpoints, because in these cases, different perspectives are linked to distinct grammars, methods of expression, and ways of judging conflicting knowledge claims.

Our goal in this essay is not to present a comprehensive theory regarding how these differences emerge, what effect they have on discussion, or how groups can overcome or embrace them. We intend only to clarify how our definition of public deliberation can acknowledge and respect these differences, rather than merely privileging the prevailing, rationalistic mode of speaking and knowing. Toward this end, we briefly turn to the classical origins of modern communication theory.

Aristotle (trans. 1991) distinguished three types of rhetorical discourse: *epideiktikon* (demonstrative discourse, to mark present occasions and

ceremonies), *dikanikon* (forensic discourse, concerning judicial matters of past-fact), and *symbouleutikon* (deliberative discourse, concerning future courses of action). In the Aristotelian sense of the concept, deliberation is concerned wholly with the persuasive advancement of a priori opinions. In this sense, deliberation is rhetorical rather than dialogically generative. Deliberators have three “artistic proofs” at their disposal: *ethos* (appeals concerning the speaker’s authority and trustworthiness), *pathos* (emotional appeals), and *logos* (enthymatically logical reasoning). Of these, logic is the most valued because speeches “with enthymemes excite more favorable audience reaction” (p. 41). Moreover, in the face-to-face exchange that marks the Aristotelian dialectical process, logical rules are the fulcrum of knowledge production.

To this day, Western thought has continued to privilege logic in idealistic treatments of deliberation. Although the value of reason stands, it is important to recognize that there are as many different forms of “reason” as there are cultural perspectives and ways of speaking. For a deliberative body to assume that Western linear logical principles—a set of specific rules—constitute the venue’s standard reasoning form would be to impose “rational domination” (Morgan, 1986, p. 275). To minimize the imposition of a standard reasoning form, such as Western logic, deliberation must permit different modes of argument. As Barge (2002) argues, “Democratic deliberation needs to be expanded to include alternatives to the language game that has traditionally dominated the playing field” (p. 166).

Thus, when participants bring with them divergent ways of speaking and knowing, public deliberation must include some measure of dialogue.<sup>5</sup> Drawing on the influential works of Buber (1965) and Bakhtin (1981), diverse conceptions of dialogue have emerged in recent years (e.g., Baxter and Montgomery, 1996; Bohm, 1996; Isaacs, 1999; Shotter, 1993). Among these different understandings, the notion of dialogue advanced by Pearce and Littlejohn (1997) best fits our purposes. In their view, dialogue is an orientation to conflict that is open to changing not just what one believes but also how one talks and even thinks about an issue. In a moral conflict, this means (at least provisionally) transcending the clash between competing worldviews and collaboratively reflecting on them. At a minimum, dialogue strives to realize “the possibility of developing a Creole language in which one side can communicate with the other” (Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997, p. 123).

Although it might aim to do so, dialogue does not allow participants to “see the world through one another’s eyes” or “stand in each others’ shoes.” Doing so would require them to shed their own cultural and historical experiences, which is “not only impossible but manifestly absurd” (Gadamer, 1990, p. 397)—especially if they are to “bring relevant

aspects of [themselves] to the conversation” (Stewart & Logan, 1998, p. 262). Dialogue does, however, allow participants to jointly forge a shared way of speaking. This permits what Gadamer (1990) calls a “fusion of horizons” according to which conversants’ different pre-conceptions are brought into play in a manner that lets synthetic meanings “speak for [them]” (p. 397) in the context of this unique relationship. More precisely, democratic public deliberation can exhibit any one of three dialogic features, depending on the nature of the differences among participants. Each of these approaches gives the speaker the benefit of the doubt when a listener disagrees or simply cannot understand the speaker’s argument. Eventually, the listener may choose to believe that the speaker lacks basic communication competencies or is being manipulative or deceptive, but competence or credibility fall into question only after attempts to engage in dialogue.<sup>6</sup>

The first dialogic response is the simplest of the three. When a participant hears a viewpoint articulated that he or she does not share or cannot understand, the minimal dialogic response is to suspend disbelief and continue listening. This is a minor extension of the consideration criterion introduced earlier. One difference is that this form of listening often involves active inquiry. Encouraging, open-ended questions aimed at understanding another perspective can elicit more complete arguments, illustrations of key points, and justifications underlying the speaker’s views (Stewart & Logan, 1998, p. 192).

In the second dialogic response, a deliberative participant who fails to understand another’s viewpoint, even after careful reflection, employs empathy (Rogers, 1980). Although it is strictly impossible to put oneself in another’s position, it is helpful to refocus attention from the content of the other’s argument to the individual person. This involves “being sensitive, moment by moment, to the changing felt meanings which flow in this other person” (Rogers, 1980, p. 142). This may be accomplished through an imaginative effort to perceive “the other’s internal frame of reference accurately, understanding another life from the other’s perspective, while not relinquishing one’s own identity” (Cissna & Anderson, 1998, p. 92). This is consistent with our earlier insistence that arguments need not always be framed in terms of the public good. Sometimes it is better simply to begin by hearing how individual participants view a public issue in terms of their own self-interest. When participants speak from their own experience and in terms of their own interests, other participants can more easily recognize real differences in background and identity.

As Fraser (1992) argues in a critique of rationalist conceptions of deliberation, it is a mistake to require that speakers bracket their social status and only submit reasoned arguments in the public interest. More

often than not, self-interest is masked by false appeals to the public good, as Mendelberg and Oleske (2000) demonstrated in a case study of town meetings on public education. When a listener hears a person speak from an authentic, personal viewpoint, she or he will be better equipped to understand that speaker's perspective.

If one is still confused regarding the other participant's viewpoint, a third dialogic response is to try creating a shared language or mode of reasoning. The time limits constraining many deliberative forums may make this approach the most difficult to realize in practice. Nonetheless, when participants remain unable to understand one another's perspectives, even after competent and earnest attempts to do so, it is necessary to seek a new way of talking and thinking together.

New ways of talking and reasoning together can be negotiated on structural and interpersonal levels. On the structural level, innovations can begin with a meeting's procedures. These procedures may be emergent or imposed by design, and they are often influenced by inherited, "normal" ways of talking about particular issues (Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997). For example, in preparation for the 1994 United Nations Conference on Population and Development, the Public Conversations Project explicitly identified "old" and "destructive" ways of talking about developmental issues, so as to foster participants' reflective and conscientious efforts "to collaborate . . . in an experience in which old ways of relating over the issue would be deliberately avoided in order to have a new conversation" (Chasin et al., 1996, p. 331).

New ways of interacting can also be negotiated on the level of interpersonal communication, in which cultural identities and ways of speaking come to bear. People of various social backgrounds and affiliations differ in general communicative preferences (Philipsen, 1992), argumentation styles (Foss & Griffin, 1995; Johnstone, 1996; Warnick & Manusov, 1999), and civic interaction (Sanders, 1997). In deliberative settings where distinctions are highlighted—as in moral conflicts—such linguistic differences are likely to interfere with relationship development and understandings of message content. Further, they may inspire the ethnocentric sense that the other's communicative style is inferior. For these reasons, practitioners such as Pearce and Littlejohn (1997) pay careful attention to how participants understand "the patterns of communication that they [are] creating with each other (*coherence*) and how they meshed their actions together (*coordination*)" (p. 19). A key strategy is to openly address stylistic differences, bringing them to the content level of discussion where they can be demystified.

Unfortunately, it can be difficult to achieve such meta-linguistic reflectivity on the structural and interpersonal levels, especially in cases such as random-sample forums in which 30 or more complete strangers

may meet only briefly. A rare forum might find some common language in the midst of linguistic diversity, perhaps with the aid of trained facilitators and well-tailored procedures, such as those advocated by Barge (2002), Pearce and Littlejohn (1997), and the Public Conversations Project (Roth, Becker, Herzig, Chasin, & Chasin, 1992). Nonetheless, it is likely that brief forums on issues that introduce incommensurate worldviews will be unable to meet this criterion for deliberation.

If a deliberative group successfully creates its own way of talking and knowing, it faces an additional challenge: In the end, deliberation requires not just a final decision but also a justification of that choice. If a subgroup of a larger polity has arrived at its own language, it must discern a way to speak to the larger public it represents. Because of this difficulty, it is entirely possible that a deliberative group may develop a unique internal language, while reporting its findings using more conventional discourse. By our definition, such a choice would not make the group any less deliberative.

In sum, the dialogic component of deliberation serves two purposes: It promotes careful analysis of problems and solutions, and it also makes discussion more democratic. As we have defined it, dialogue shares much with “validating conversation” (Stewart, 1994). Tapping into previously unrealized or unacknowledged perspectives within a group brings different epistemologies to bear on a common problem, and that can result in a more sophisticated analysis of any public issue. At the same time, dialogue promotes fairness and inclusion by opening up conversation about alternative ways of speaking and knowing.

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### **Developing a Theory of Deliberation**

Having defined the basic features of face-to-face public deliberation, it is now possible for us to place this conceptual definition in a larger, meta-theoretical framework. The purpose of this framing is to go beyond what counts as deliberation and begin to ask where it comes from and what its impact is on participants and their larger social worlds.

#### **Structuration as a Theoretical Framework**

A theory well suited to this purpose is structuration (Giddens, 1984). Communication scholars have found structuration theory to be a useful framework within which one can build theories on particular subjects, such as social influence in groups (Poole, Seibold, & McPhee, 1996). We think structuration can serve the same purpose with regard to theorizing deliberation.

Structuration theory analyzes the general process of production and reproduction of social systems (Giddens, 1984). A central concept is the

“duality of structure.” Designed to resolve disputes between structural-determinists and agency-centered theorists, this principle maintains that social “structures are both produced by human action and are . . . the medium of human action” (Craib, 1992, p. 44). This means that the behaviors of purposeful social actors produce and reproduce social structures (conceived of as a set of rules and resources), yet those behavioral choices are, at the same time, influenced by the existing set of structures. For example, the words we write are shaped by our understanding of the rules (structures) of standard English, yet our current choices will have an effect on the future form of those rules. Any single action an actor takes today has a miniscule impact, and the system of rules that exists in the future is nothing more than the sum of such actions taken by all actors who are part of that system. Thus, social structures are the medium and product of human action.

Our conception of deliberation readily translates into the language of structuration theory, and it is useful to conduct this translation before placing the concept into a larger structurational model. First, deliberation entails the careful weighing of information. The acquisition of information about the problem at hand along with the potential solutions constitutes the accumulation of resources (knowledge). The evaluative criteria used to process this knowledge are rules (normative standards for measuring value). The requirements for a deliberative evaluation process are also rules, including both standards for conducting optimal problem-analysis (e.g., the recognition of policy tradeoffs) and democratic norms of fairness (e.g., giving due consideration to different participants’ conflicting evaluative criteria). Participation rights and responsibilities constitute a cluster of rules that include democratic power relations (e.g., sufficient opportunity to speak for each participant) and egalitarian social norms (e.g., the right to understand the discussion coupled with the responsibility to consider what others have to say). The final requirement of dialogue is necessary when participants have incommensurate ways of speaking and knowing; this meta-rule asks that a group seek a shared (or at least commensurate) set of rules for using language and evaluating evidence.

Structuration theory, however, is more than simply a taxonomy by which one can categorize different rules and resources. A central tenet of structuration theory is that structures interact with one another and, as a result, often form groupings or sets (Cohen, 1989, pp. 84–90; Giddens, 1984, pp. 185–193). When viewed from the structurational perspective, a society is nothing more than a massive cluster of structures that have persisted for a long period of time and over a sufficiently large span of space. Within societies, there are many subsystems in which structures have become integrated into smaller clusters. When the forces

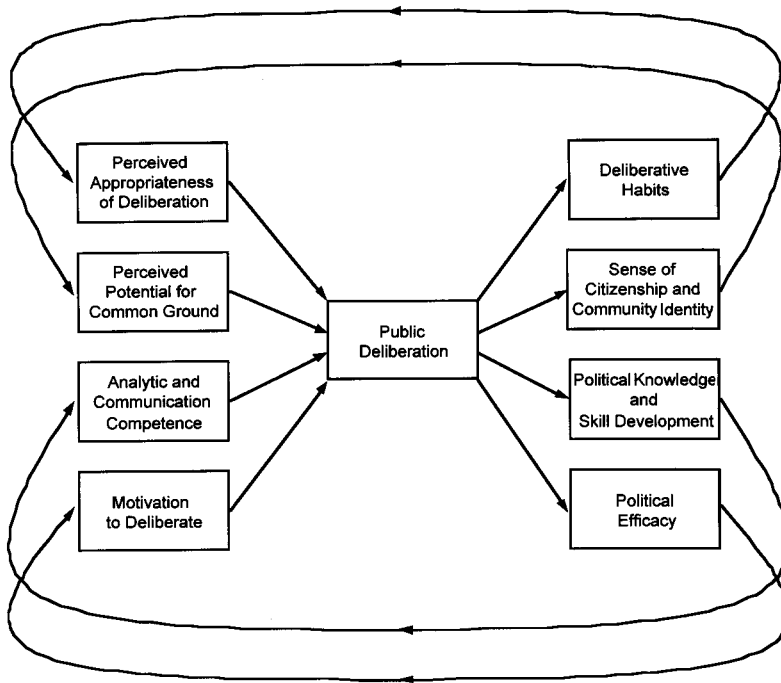


Figure 1.  
Hypothesized  
Relationships  
Among  
Variables in  
the Self-  
Reinforcing  
Model of  
Public  
Deliberation

that reproduce these subsystems become regularized, a “reproduction circuit” is said to exist (Giddens, 1984, pp. 27–28; Cohen, 1990, pp. 38–42). For our purposes, the type of circuit of most importance is the “homeostatic loop.” As Giddens (1984) explains, homeostatic system reproduction is “the operation of causal loops, in which a range of unintended consequences of action feed back to reconstitute the initiating circumstances” (p. 27). In more concrete terms, some social behaviors reinforce expectations, attitudes, beliefs, and habits that, in turn, are conducive to the original behaviors. Moreover, in the case of homeostatic loops, the social system (or subsystem) is reproduced even though social actors did not intend this effect.

Such loops are by no means inevitable, and they can come into existence as a consequence of other changes in larger social systems. It is our contention that deliberation may be at the heart of an emerging homeostatic reproduction circuit; thus, we have named our theory the self-reinforcing model of deliberation (see Figure 1). In essence, we posit that participating in face-to-face public deliberation strengthens the cognitions, attitudes, and habits conducive to future deliberation. Figure 1, however, is not meant to be a complete list of the potential causes and effects of deliberation, nor is it an inventory of all possible links among the variables shown.

## Basic Structuration and the Deliberative Habit

The top loop of the homeostatic reproduction circuit in Figure 1 is closest to what we call “basic structuration”—the process whereby a social practice is deemed appropriate and reinforced through repetitive habits (Giddens, 1984). In this case, we hypothesize that deliberation is more likely to occur if discussion participants perceive it as an appropriate mode of political discourse in a given social situation. In turn, deliberation is habit-forming in a basic structuration sense: the practice of it makes the behavior understandable and normal. Finally, habituation to deliberation makes a social actor more likely to perceive it as appropriate in the future.

**Perceived Appropriateness of Deliberation.** Deliberation is more likely to occur when participants have a broad understanding of how the deliberative process works, as well as a belief that such a process is appropriate (Cohen, 1997; Gastil, 1993). In structuration terms, actors must be “knowledgeable about their activities” to perform complex social interactions. In particular, actors must have a “practical consciousness, which is bound up with action and cannot be expressed in language” (Poole et al., 1996, p. 119). This tacit knowledge of what behavior is socially appropriate permits participants to act without consciously questioning what they are doing.

This conception of tacit knowledge dovetails with Bormann’s (1996) notion of special group theories. Bormann maintains that members of a culture typically develop a shared understanding of how face-to-face groups behave in different social settings. These understandings can become quite precise and evolve into a special theory that may include a philosophical rationale, an ideal model of discussion, and a concrete procedure for improving practice. For instance, one such shared understanding in the United States is the “special theory of public discussion” (Bormann, 1996, p. 102), which has much in common with our conception of deliberation.

**Reinforcing Deliberative Habits.** A closely related effect of participating in deliberation is the positive reinforcement of deliberative habits. In political philosophy, such behavioral reinforcement has become known as the participation hypothesis, which states that citizens become more engaged in debate and decision making at all levels of government when they begin to use their opportunities for direct political participation (Barber, 1984; Warren, 1992). The participation hypothesis maintains that one form of political action leads to other, distinct forms of engagement. Herein, we make the more modest claim that deliberation can become habitual. For example, Gastil and Dillard (1999a) found that participants in the National Issues Forums often

“discover that they can deliberate together, rather than arguing against one another.” After participating in forums, “NIF participation appeared to reduce [participants’] eagerness to dominate talk-time and topic-selection during political conversations” (p. 189).

This habit-forming quality of deliberation, in turn, makes participants more likely to view the deliberative model as appropriate in future political encounters. This causal loop is at the heart of structuration theory. Social norms, meanings, and power relations, such as those drawn on to produce deliberative communication sequences, reproduce themselves through their use in interaction. If repeated often enough across a wide enough space, social practices can become routines within a larger sociopolitical system. Such routines are integral “both to the continuity of the personality of the agent . . . and to the institutions of society, which are such only through their continued reproduction” (Giddens, 1984, p. 60). Once the members of a political community come to view a particular mode of talk as routine, it also tends to become legitimate. After all, it is this process of normalization that causes the conflation of the two meanings of normal—that which is simply typical and that which is appropriate.

### **The Discovery of Shared Values and Identities**

The other three loops in the homeostatic reproduction circuit shown in Figure 1 go beyond this basic form of social reproduction. Each of these has a cause and effect that is more distinct from basic structuration, and each increases the likelihood that public deliberation will have consequences that unintentionally bolster precursors of deliberation itself. One loop traces connections from the perceived potential for common ground (in structuration terms, a normative expectation) to deliberation (a social practice) to a sense of shared identity (a self-understanding), and then back to common ground.

**Perception of Potential Common Ground.** Although most contemporary deliberative theorists are critical of the notion of a singular a priori public good or general will (Rousseau, 1950), they do argue that deliberation requires a commonly recognizable sense of the public good that participants can use to evaluate reasons and solutions (Barber, 1984; Mathews, 1994). This does not mean that deliberation can only proceed when participants start with a broadly shared set of values. Instead, the point is that participants need to perceive some potential for shared language, understandings, or even policy judgments (Barber, 1984; Mathews, 1994).

Such a perception of common ground cannot be taken for granted. In the United States, for example, the adversarial democratic tradition has emphasized the incompatibility and mutual exclusivity of

competing political philosophies (Mansbridge, 1983). This has evolved into what Tannen (1998) calls an “argument culture,” which polarizes liberals and conservatives, obscuring any potential common ground shared by competing partisan viewpoints.

**Changing Self-Conceptions.** Moving from causes to consequences of deliberation, Warren (1992) claims that the joint activity of deliberation transforms one’s self-conception as a citizen. Dewey (1954) has also suggested that public deliberation produces public goods and public selves, which transcend the aggregation of individual interests. This view of the self as shaped through dialogue is consistent with social constructionism (Shotter, 1993) and some interpersonal communication theories (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Stewart & Logan, 1998).

Our concern is with a particular aspect of the self: one’s self-conception as a citizen and community member. Because it entails the consideration of multiple viewpoints, deliberation is likely to produce a more inclusive public identity. After deliberating, people are more likely to recognize the values and views that they share with others, as well as to obtain a broader sense of joint membership in political units, for example a city, state, or nation (Barber, 1984; Mathews, 1994). Such a transformation could counter the atomism and self-interestedness that seems to pervade modern democracies (Warren, 1996b). Finally, because deliberation leads citizens to consider the arguments of other citizens, it should produce increased understanding and tolerance of the variety of perspectives on the public good (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996; Warren, 1996b).

If deliberation has these effects on participants’ self-conceptions, it could also have an indirect effect on individuals’ future perceptions of the potential for common ground. After all, one is more likely to presume the possibility of shared beliefs and ways of speaking when one’s self-conception is that of a citizen, a member of a larger political community. By contrast, an isolated individual who feels no civic connection to fellow citizens is less likely to imagine much in common with distant others.

### **Building Cognitive and Communicative Resources**

Though much of the deliberative homeostatic reproduction circuit concerns the reinforcement of rules of meaning, power relations, and norms, the third component of this circuit concerns the gradual accumulation of the resources necessary for deliberation, particularly cognitive, verbal, and social skills. We hypothesize a set of links from analytic and communication competence (cognitive and verbal abilities) to deliberation (social practice) to political knowledge and skills (information resources and abilities), which then link back to competencies.

**Analytic and Communication Skills.** At a minimum, public deliberation requires citizens to have the cognitive capacity to consider thoughtfully a range of perspectives on pertinent social, economic, and political issues. Logical reasoning, abstract thought, and information-processing skills are all helpful for this purpose. Beyond reasoning and cognition, participants also need to be able to articulate their individual interests (Sanders, 1997), make sound arguments for particular policy options (Gastil, 1993), frame those arguments in terms of a common good (Bohman, 1996; Cohen, 1997; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996), and engage in dialogue (Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997).

**Building Knowledge and Competence.** Just as particular cognitive and communicative resources promote deliberation, so too does deliberation help participants develop related cognitive resources. Through active participation in a deliberative process, individuals can develop a broader knowledge base (Denver et al., 1995; Fishkin & Luskin, 1999) and more refined judgments (Gastil & Dillard, 1999b). Taken together, these increases in political knowledge and sophistication could lead to an increase in forum participants' ability to interpret and analyze political information during future discussions. This process is analogous to what happens to elected officials serving in legislative bodies (Bessette, 1994). In a direct way, participants develop the communication skills that make deliberation possible. Such an impact is consistent with Bandura's (1986) social-cognitive theory of learning, which stresses the importance of behavioral enactment and direct observation in the educational process.

### **Motivation and Efficacy**

Thus far, the deliberative homeostatic reproduction circuit has illustrated how engaging in deliberation can reinforce relevant rules and resources. The final element of the circuit complements these processes by showing how deliberation both depends upon and reinforces a motivation to participate.

**Motivation to Deliberate.** Participants are likely to deliberate only if they are sufficiently motivated to process the content of the arguments they hear, rather than simply focusing on the peripheral cues of messages. Processing a message is a taxing activity, and listeners routinely use cognitive heuristics that ignore the central content of a message, following the cues at the periphery of the message (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Consequently, organizers of deliberative forums have often gone to great lengths to generate high levels of participant motivation. Citizen jury sponsors, for instance, give participants financial compensation and a clear "charge" designed to focus and inspire them (Crosby, 1995).

**Reinforcing Political Efficacy.** Participation in public deliberation could reinforce this vital motivational impulse by increasing participants' sense

of political efficacy. Clear evidence of this effect comes from the 1996 National Issues Convention (Fishkin & Luskin, 1999). It is likely that increases in political efficacy lead to a heightened motivation to deliberate when future opportunities present themselves. It is not enough to have the requisite skills to deliberate; one must also have confidence in one's abilities (Bandura, 1986). Deliberative practice heightens citizens' expectations that public deliberation will prove fruitful. Thus, in the future they may be more motivated to deliberate when choosing among a range of possible modes of political communication.

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## Conclusion

Participating in face-to-face public deliberation appears to strengthen deliberative beliefs, skills, and habits; therefore, we have named this process the self-reinforcing model of deliberation. This model does not specify the size of each hypothesized relationship, but the general claim is that the effects of deliberation substantially increase the probability that participants will deliberate in the future when opportunities for political talk arise. The influence of other cultural and political forces, such as adversarial impulses (Mansbridge, 1983; Tannen, 1998), may overwhelm the self-reinforcing effect of deliberation, but all other things being equal, public deliberation is capable of carving a niche for itself.

At the heart of the self-reinforcing model is a detailed theoretical definition of deliberation, which we created by bringing together theory and research from diverse scholarly traditions. We have defined face-to-face public deliberation as (a) a process that involves the careful weighing of information and views, (b) an egalitarian process with adequate speaking opportunities and attentive listening by participants, and (c) dialogue that bridges differences among participants' diverse ways of speaking and knowing.

As future research moves toward operationalization of deliberation, it will be necessary to make further refinements. At a minimum, observational data will need to be complemented by self-report measures to record participants' subjective experiences regarding speaking opportunities, consideration of other participants' perspectives, comprehension of information, and sophistication of judgment. Moreover, there may be considerable divergence between that which is experienced and that which is observed during deliberation. This will make an operational definition of deliberation challenging, but not impossible.

We recommend that researchers measure deliberation as a multidimensional concept, rather than simply seeking an aggregate "deliberation score." Each element of the definition is so important in its own right that an evaluator would need to know how a group performed with

regard to each one. Although our definition describes ideal standards that groups might pursue, in practice a clear and attainable threshold for each aspect of deliberation should emerge. To make an analogy to a driver's test, a driver who does not halt at stop signs fails the exam no matter how well he or she braked, turned, or parked. An average driving score, in this case, would obscure the important failure to learn one essential component of safe driving. In the same sense, a group that appears deliberative in many respects might repeatedly disregard a single group member. Any overall evaluation of such a group should highlight that particular failing, and as a consequence, the group might fail to reach the threshold for being labeled deliberative.

Finally, we stress that deliberation is only one of many kinds of political talk that help maintain a healthy polity. Modern political institutions require a diversity of discourse types to function optimally (Cheney, 1995). These varied discourses fulfill many different functions, from public address, to debate, to deliberation, with numerous genres and subgenres of political talk interspersed. Each is necessary in its own way, insofar as it responds to specific contextual features. Just as one should not exalt dialogue over monologue or speaking over writing (Peters, 1999), neither should deliberation be regarded as the sole democratic form of communication. In many circumstances, it is too time-consuming, demanding, and direct.

At the present time, deliberation continues to be underutilized in the political process. Numerous organizations in the United States and abroad have begun to address this problem by developing new opportunities for deliberation (Button & Mattson, 1999; Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997; Ryfe, 1999). It has been our aim to inform these practices by clarifying the democratic and discursive qualities of the deliberative ideal. Doing so may illuminate the contextual boundaries within which deliberation may flourish. In addition, our self-reinforcing model of deliberation shows how deliberation might fit into the larger web of sociopolitical practices. If implemented in appropriate settings designed to promote a rich communicative process, new programs in citizen discussion might create a permanent and powerful role for deliberation in public life.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> If understood in this way, it is not surprising that Habermas's (1984) "ideal speech situation" exists only as an abstraction (Benhabib, 1992; Bohman, 1996; Dryzek, 1990).
- <sup>2</sup> We use the terms public and political interchangeably, although some scholars distinguish between the terms (e.g., Barber, 1984). One such distinction is that the political is a subset of the public; only some public problems can or should be addressed through the political process.
- <sup>3</sup> Groups need not go through these functions (or phases) in linear order, although significant revelations in more primary phases have implications for other phases (e.g., changing the evaluative criteria creates the need for revisiting the evaluation phase).
- <sup>4</sup> We broadly define a stakeholder as anyone whose interests are significantly affected by a policy. We exclude from consideration "intrusive" interests (Cohen, 1997), such as when one person's happiness depends on how other people choose to live their "private" lives.
- <sup>5</sup> We do not mean to imply that dialogue is a subset of public deliberation; rather, dialogue and deliberation are terms that have some conceptual overlap but much independent meaning. Barge (2002) appears to take a similar view when he argues for enlarging the meaning of deliberation to incorporate not just debate and discussion but also dialogue.
- <sup>6</sup> We distinguish speakers and listeners for the convenience of identifying momentary roles in interaction. We emphasize listening skills because, as Stewart and Logan (1998) observe, "Most of the time you don't talk your way into good relationships, you listen your way into them" (p. 186).

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