Deliberative Forums in Attitude Research: Practical Issues

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The ‘Norface Our Children’s Europe’ research project has adopted a mix-methods approach that utilises Deliberative Forums (DFs). In this brief report I focus on some of the practical issues that need to be considered when employing this research methodology in attitude research. The practical issues covered include the stewarding board, location, facilitation, involvement of experts, and recruitment of the participants. At the end of the report I raise some further more thematic and epistemological problems in relation to the outcomes of DFs in research projects and analysis of their data and make some tentative suggestions here for consideration.

The Stewarding Board

Assembling an appropriate Stewarding Board is a crucial component in the organisation of deliberative forums because it underpins the arguments that can eventually be made about the fairness, legitimacy and transparency of the process. This is particularly important in research that deals with contested policy terrain such as welfare. Often, organisers and sponsors can be seen with suspicion by stakeholders from all sides of the debate, and the Stewarding Board should ideally function as the guarantor of the overall integrity of the process.

However, when deliberative forums are used as part of a research project, rather than part of a real policy making process, there is more scope to give the Stewarding Board less responsibilities than they would otherwise have, as the Research Team understandably needs to retain overall control over the project and the power to make final decisions. Nonetheless, the Stewarding Boards typically are used to assist with the following played a central role in deciding by consensus:

* The forum task
* The locations of the forums
* The list of potential and final witnesses/ experts
* Demographic criteria for recruiting participants (i.e. gender, age, income)
* Materials to be included in the Participants’ Handbook
* The Forum timetable and facilitation schedules

Defining the forum task is easier when they are being held within a real policy making. In that case, participants would be tasked with examining the merits of a detailed proposal and produce a reasoned response and set of recommendations. However, when setting a task for a DF used in a research project it becomes more difficult to keep it specific, doable and relevant.

Deliberative Forum Location

Finding a suitable venue for a DF can seem deceptively simple, and yet it often becomes a key challenge for organisers. There are not many spaces that fulfil all the needs of a process like this, for instance:

* **Accessibility:** Ideally, the venue should be fairly central, easy to get to by public transport and by car (i.e. have car parking nearby), and accessible for disable participants.
* **Size:** It should be big enough to comfortably sit the number of participants in plenary sessions, and be able to split them in separate working groups. It should also have space to accommodate the organisers, researchers and witnesses without becoming a distraction to the participants.
* **Layout:** Organisers and facilitators will have to play with the space, adapting layouts and furniture to the needs of each session. For instance, during sessions with witnesses tables in horseshoe form are often used for the plenary sessions, and separate roundtable stations for working groups. Yet other times, smaller circles without tables for small group discussion are required. In addition, you might want ‘stage’ for witnesses/ experts to present. The point is that the venue must be adaptable for a range of participation formats and facilitation techniques.
* **Acoustics.** Unfortunately, many venues for public forums are built on the assumption that there shall be a speaker and an audience, and this is problematic when it comes to accommodating participatory forums where people deliberate in groups. The acoustics of a room can have a detrimental effect on the extent to which people can follow a conversation and thus meaningfully engage with it. Using microphones can be the obvious solution, but they also have a downside. Unless everyone is equipped with one (which is expensive) having only a pair of roaming microphones can also hinder the flow of interaction and even put some people off from speaking.
* **Catering area.** Ideally, the venue should have a separate area for catering, not only because people are often glad to move and have a separate social space after spending long periods working in the same room, but also because this means less disruption of the sessions by the caterers.
* **Symbolism.** It can be useful to remember that spaces are ‘political’ in at least two ways –one internal, the other external. Firstly, different layouts can symbolise different relationships (i.e. the hierarchical nature of a speaker/audience set up vs. the egalitarian ethos of a circle of chairs) and thus foster different dynamics and interactions. Hence my comments above regarding the ability to play with various layouts. Secondly, it often matters to take into account what certain venues may mean to different people. For instance, the nature of the building where the venue is located can represent and symbolise different values and elicit certain assumptions (i.e. government building vs. community hall vs. commercial space). It must be noted that opting for community spaces is not only arguably more coherent from a participatory ethos, but also more affordable.

**Facilitation**

Deliberative forums make use of facilitators or moderators to help ensure that the proceedings reflect deliberative norms and practices. Facilitators have the role of ensuring that participant discussion is not dominated by a few members of the group, that each person is able to have a fair say, and that participants do not engage in abusive, dismissive or domineering activity. This has led some critics to argue that these types of ‘deliberative’ mechanisms are open to manipulation and are unlikely to reflect the freely arrived at views of the participants (Furedi 2005: 118-119). In particular, the facilitator can be seen as potentially having the power to control the process and to direct the deliberation in a specific direction. Evidence does not suggest that facilitators engage in widespread manipulation but, for some, the question of potential manipulation remains in need of satisfactory answers.

Therefore, when designing deliberative forums, there are always dilemmas around how much should be planned, how strict and regimented the process should be, and the extent to which facilitators run the risk of fostering too much ‘artificial’ interaction. These dilemmas are based on the assumption that there is such thing as a ‘natural’ or ‘free’ flow of interaction between participants, which may be hindered or stifled by too much process design and interventionist facilitators who impose certain patterns.

However, the notion that there is such thing as a ‘natural’ or ‘free’ flow of interaction deserves scrutiny. Human contact is unavoidably ordered and regulated by the assumptions, habits and practices at play in different social contexts. This means that groups usually interact according to the norms and patterns that seem appropriate in a given context. For instance, if public consultation meetings are understood as places where only the most vocal participate, where it is acceptable to engage in ritualised confrontation, and where shallow exchanges are the norm, then those patterns of interaction will tend to be replicated by people entering that space. In other words, those kinds of interactions may come to be seen as the ‘natural’ state of things, but those open and free-flowing meeting are arguably as ‘constructed’ or ‘artificial’ as a rigorously designed and facilitated forum. The main difference, however, is that the former may privilege certain individuals (e.g. articulate, vocal) and silence others. In that sense, this amounts to replicating at the forum some of the broader inequalities of society. That is what Young (2000) calls “internal exclusion”, and the job of process designers and facilitators is to prevent it.

Therefore there are a series of guiding concerns and priorities that need to be considered to shape the facilitation of the forums. Deliberative forums tend to include a ‘learning phase’ where participants are provided with relevant information, often from a range of experts and witnesses, who they also get to question, and a ‘deliberative phase’ where participants exchange reasons and attempt to persuade each other on the validity of their preferences on the issue. Each phase requires different approaches to facilitation:

* The key is to support the participants in **accomplishing the task** in the time available. So the process has to have all the necessary ingredients to give participants a fair chance of getting the job done. This includes realistic timings and objectives for each section, as well as enough information for the learning phase (but respecting the different learning needs of participants) and enough time for deliberation in the decision-making phase (without being overwhelming and loosing participants through exhaustion).
* **Ensuring that the process is inclusive** and gives all the jurors opportunities to participate in shaping outputs. This means using a range of methods and techniques to ensure that different styles of participation are enabled. For instance, some participants prefer oral communication, while others feel more comfortable writing up ideas. The process should include various ways of making each participant’s voice heard e.g.: speaking, writing, voting, prioritising, etc. This also includes using facilitation skills and techniques to avoid ‘undesirable dynamics’ e.g. dominating, monologuing, polarising, interrupting, attacking, etc.
* Designing the forums with a **progressive logic**, that is, building each section steadily on the previous one. This enables participants to understand how the forum works and to develop a shared narrative about the job at hand. For instance, having a clear sense of purpose and progression e.g. learning, scrutinising and exploring phase and a deliberating and making decisions collectively phase. The other function of the progressive logic is to make the overall task less daunting. By breaking the task into smaller tasks that build on the previous, the group can develop a sense of steady accomplishment and direction, without being overwhelmed by the overarching objective of the process.
* Trying to make the forums **as enjoyable as possible**. This means, for instance, making the sessions dynamics and participative, keeping presentations short and sharp, breaking monotony by alternating different types of exercises and forms of participation, and having as many long breaks as feasible. Humour and enthusiasm, can also go a long way towards this.
* Using a **responsive facilitation style**, that is, adapting the role of the facilitator to the situation at hand. Sometimes facilitators may adopt an interventionist style, for instance to ensure that all voices are heard, that the group is on track to accomplish the task, or to help the group deal with unproductive communication dynamics. Other times, facilitators may adopt a light-touch style (e.g. simply time-keeping) when a group is working inclusively and effectively and needs no further support. Facilitators must be attentive, read group dynamics as they unfold and adapt intervention styles accordingly. This is intensive work, and ideally should be shared by at least two facilitators.
* Building the forums on core principles and practices of **dialogue and deliberation**, as documented by a long tradition of scholars and practitioners. Dialogue and deliberation are two different types of communication, with their own dynamics and requirements (Escobar 2011). To the extent possible, the DFs should be designed to incorporate elements from both forms of communication. For instance, the learning phase is usually intended to be more dialogic –i.e. focussed on building understanding and relationships– and the deliberative phase more deliberative –i.e. considering options and making reasoned collective decisions.

Experts

Deliberative forums tend to include experts and interests groups as witnesses and informers in the process, and they provide the relevant information on which the participants will deliberate, so it is not just the selection of the participants that can influence the inclusivity of the process. From a deliberative perspective it is vital to ensure all relevant views and salient information is given to the participants.

It seems clear that the experts’ presentations are indispensable to the process of DFs, with research from the Citizens’ Assemblies in particular indicating that these presentations were the most useful in the whole process in terms of informing the participants (the deliberative phase being the next most useful) (Fournier et al. 2011). Experts act as arbiters in DFs, mainly dealing with technical questions, which can facilitate lay deliberation, except when ‘the issue involves extensive political controversy and scientific uncertainty’ as experts lose neutrality in these situations. In such circumstances it becomes imperative that DFs have experts with competing political views (Fishkin 2009: 120).

DFs have been criticised for excluding experts with vested interests, and technical expertise ‘There is a danger that even before citizens are directly involved, issues, information and witnesses might be mobilised out of the process’ (Smith and Wales 2000: 58). This bias can be reduced by having an advisory group or Stewarding Board made up of a diverse range of interests and opinions relevant to the issue. In Danish Consensus Conferences the participants also get to choose the final selection of experts and advocates. However, it is not always the case that key interest groups are intentionally excluded from the process, they often exclude themselves (Hendriks 2002, 2006): ‘Serious substantive problems in the deliberative process arise from the blunt refusal of stakeholders to engage with the jury event. The fact that a jury can be strongly driven by speaker effects, despite great efforts to achieve balance, is itself a substantive problem’ (French and Laver 2009: 442). This is less of a problem though when DFs are used for research rather than within a policy-process.

Nevertheless, selecting and getting commitment from suitable witnesses is one of the biggest challenges when organising deliberative forums. Firstly, a deliberative forum needs to have a balanced set of experts that will represent a range of relevant perspectives. Ideally the participants themselves should have some control over this selection.

Ensuring availability for the chosen experts is also a significant problem. In effect, it means asking people to commit to attendance which can include travel, as well as time for preparation. The availability of funding for experts is then an issue. In some cases they contribute as part of their day job, while in others they do so in their own time. This can give an advantage to witnesses from well-resourced organisations

Experts also need to be prepared and briefed by the research team. Recommendations for good practice here include providing a full brief about the deliberative forum, its purpose and structure, as well as the role of the experts, and the logistics involved. Secondly, experts should also receive a second brief with presentation guidelines to try and ensure consistency in terms of length and accessibility. Finally, if the same experts are to be used in more than one of the deliberative forums on the research project they should be provided with feedback after the first DF to help make some improvements based on the things that had worked well and those that could be improved.

Recruiting Deliberative Forum Participants

For inclusive and effective deliberation, a DF must include a diverse sample of citizens with a mixture of social characteristics and attitudes towards the DF topic. Either a random or stratified sample of the population is selected to achieve a ‘deliberative microcosm’ of the population, with each citizen having an equal chance of being selected. Smaller DFs are not intended to be statistically representative of the population, but are still ‘demographically diverse’ (Hendriks 2005: 96). For Fishkin (2006: 43) ‘These methods often suffer from the same problem...they begin with self-selection and then employ such small numbers that any claims to representativeness cannot be credibly established. Another problem is that these research designs do not permit evaluation of how those agreeing to participate compare to those who do not.’ In research projects with comparatively small samples of participants in DFs serious consideration should therefore be given to using a control group.

To achieve this level of inclusion and representativeness within the relatively small number of participants in a DF is challenging. There is also an inevitable problem of self-selection, as even those who are randomly selected must agree to participate. Although not ideal, this does not ultimately affect the inclusiveness of the DF with respect to social groups, as those that decline the invitation to participate will be replaced by someone with similar, social characteristics. However, most people invited to participate accept the invitation (Davies et al. 2006: 80-1) particularly in DFs (Smith 2009: 82), as being invited is one of the main factors that makes people participate (Lowndes et al. 2006). Nevertheless, self-selection does raise the likelihood of having participants who are politically interested and active, who also tend to be the more educated (Fishkin and Farrar 2005: 74; Smith 2009: 80-1).

There are three main ways of recruiting a representative sample of the public to a deliberative forum: 1) sampling from the electoral roll; 2) face-to-face recruitment (carried out door-to-door and/or in-street); and 3) telephone recruitment using random digit dialling.

The first approach involves buying a sample from edited electoral registers, sending an opt-in form and a short questionnaire (to collect sampling variables) to all members of the sample and compiling a database of those who respond. People in the database can then be recontacted and invited to take part in the DF. There are some disadvantages with using the electoral register as a sampling frame, however. Firstly, coverage of the edited register can be low as some people are reluctant to have their details passed on to companies for marketing purposes. Secondly, asking people to opt into the research introduces self-selection into the process which can potentially bias the sample towards those who are more civically engaged and those who hold particularly strong views. Thirdly, it is easy for people to simply ignore the opt in form, which means it is necessary to send it to a substantial number of people to achieve the desired number of responses. Fourthly, because it is necessary to allow at least a two week opt in period before re-contacting members of the sample, the overall recruitment process can be quite protracted, which increases the likelihood of drop out.

The second approach; face-to-face recruitment, involves commissioning a research agency to send specially trained recruiters to the area where the DF will be held, to enlist jurors according to a pre-agreed specification. The main advantages of this approach are that: the recruitment is undertaken in the immediate run up to the jury so drop outs are less likely; it invariably ensures a good rate of participation as people are less likely to refuse to take part in a DF when approached by a recruiter in person; and attendance rates tend to be higher because of the face-to-face commitment participants have made. Moreover, the participants tend to be more representative of the population because they are less self-selecting than those recruited through the electoral roll.

The third approach; telephone recruitment, involves using random digit dialling within specified postcode areas to contact prospective participants. Although the approach can be as effective as face-to-face recruitment in securing a representative sample, it is less cost-effective as a greater degree of over-recruitment is required to ensure the required rate of attendance (around 50% compared with around 20% in face-to-face recruitment). Also, there is less scope for telephone recruiters to target their recruitment in order to meet quotas (for example, they are less able to identity and target areas of deprivation), meaning that more time is spent screening for prospective participants.

Regardless of the recruitment approach adopted, a number of challenges tend to arise. Firstly, and as in any qualitative recruitment exercise where multiple quotas have been set (including both socio-demographic and attitudinal quotas), it is difficult for the recruiters to meet all quotas exactly whilst at the same time maintaining a balance across the other quotas. Therefore, it is inadvisable to have too many quotas in cases such as this where the overall target sample size is small (and where there are also attitudinal requirements to be met) because with every variable added the recruitment task becomes increasingly difficult and ultimately impractical.

Secondly it can be difficult for the recruiters to find people who were ‘not very’ or ‘not at all’ interested in the topic of the DF. For example if DFs are introduced as being about ‘the future of welfare in Europe’, those people who have no interest in this issue may be reluctant to take part. At the same time, a social desirability effect can arise, whereby prospective participants feel that they should say that they were interested in the future of welfare when asked, even if that is not an issue to which they given a great deal of thought.

The third main challenge often encountered during recruitment is finding people who can attend all of sittings of the DF. This means that recruiters have to approach considerably more people than would be the case for a one day event in order to find the target number of participants. In addition over-recruitment for a DF is necessary to allow for the possibility of some non-attendance.

In order to involve a cross-section of the population, organisers of DFs tend to employ a number of strategies to reduce the self-selection bias and lower barriers to participation:

* Concealing the topic for the DFs
* Timing and location. To maximize attendance they DFs are usually held at the weekend and in central locations familiar to the participants.
* Compensation. Participants are usually compensated for their participation on a daily basis with the amount of payment increasing for each subsequent day of the DF to encourage those who commence the process to stay until the last day. The importance of compensating citizens for their work, and in order to lower barriers to participation, cannot be overstated. For many people, the question is not only to be interested and have the time to participate, it is also about resources. For instance, if you are a single parent you will need childcare, if you are self-employed you may lose a days’ wage, if you are a full time carer you may need support, and so on. Compensation is thus not only an incentive to participate, but also a way of making sure that those with fewer resources are not excluded from civic engagement and the research project precisely because of that. Otherwise, potentially only certain sections of the population can participate. This highlights the deceptive nature of apparently ‘open’ public forums, where ‘everyone’ is invited but no thought is put into enabling inclusive participation.

**The Outcome of Deliberative Forums**

The outcome of a DF also influences the quality of the deliberation. For example in Citizens’ Juries, Consensus Conferences and Citizens’ Assemblies participants reach a collective recommendation. For Smith (2009: 100) this means that they can be more creative and develop novel ideas and solutions. Moreover, the final recommendations are supported by reasons. In Deliberative Polls and Planning Cells preferences are just surveyed using set questions so these dimensions do not occur: ‘The preset nature of the survey instrument raises questions about the extent to which it fully captures considered judgement’ (Smith 2009: 100). For example it is unlikely that those setting the survey can predict the changes in preferences that might occur during deliberation (Goodin 2008: 35).

There is a particular problem in using DFs purely as part of a research project and not embedding them in an actually existing policy-process as the issue can arise as to why the participants will actually try and persuade each other to amend their preferences when none of the participants’ preferences will actually be consequential as no decision is being made or proposed: ‘Deliberation, generically understood is about weighing the reasons relevant to that decision with a view to making a decision on the basis of that weighing’ (Cohen 2007: 219). This problem then is further enhanced if participants are simply surveyed, as in deliberative polling, rather than having to reach a collective recommendation.

The evidence from DFs demonstrating attitude change has been criticised, as it is hard to prove that preference change has been the result of deliberation, and not just the distributed information packs, the media coverage, or other political or psychological factors (Shapiro 2003; Jordan 2007; Sanders 2010). Research on an Australian Citizens’ Jury, where participants were surveyed before, after, but also during the process, suggests that again significant preference change is likely to occur in those who participate in a DF, but that the key factor for preference change was information gains from the information the jurors are provided with, and not deliberation itself, although the latter still did have some effect on preferences (Goodin 2008: 46-51). This result is supported by evidence from DFs in the UK (Luskin, et al. 2002: 474-8) and Canada (Fournier et al. 2011), where again information, rather than discussion had the greatest influence on preferences. More recently research from another DF in Ireland in 2011 indicated that a control group provided with the same information packs as the DF participants did not undergo as much preference change, indicating that deliberation might still be crucial (Farrell et al. 2012). Therefore, it is worth considering using survey after the learning phase of the DF and then after the deliberative phase to help ascertain what caused the (if any) changes in attitudes amongst the DF participants. Consideration might also be given to having a control group (although I am not sure if this is the role that the focus group participants are meant to have in this research project).

Rosenberg (2014) criticises the results on preference change from DFs and the survey methodology employed as it fails to ‘examine the cognitive process underlying the observed changes’, which means for Rosenberg there is an alternative and more valid interpretation of the evidence from DFs. O’Flynn and Sood (2012) also have concerns about the use of closed-end scales in the surveys Deliberative Poll participants complete, and advocate the ‘greater use of open-ended, open format measures, soliciting people’s opinions about the issues under discussion in more general terms.’ Rosenberg argues that rather than adapting preferences in light of reasons, preference change could be about conformity; where by people may just ‘adopt the preferences of others’ (Rosenberg 2014). This conclusion does not necessarily reflect evidence from Deliberative Polls though where half of the preferences move towards the mean, but half move away from the mean indicating no overall pattern (Luskin et al. 2002; Fishkin 2006: 50). However, if Rosenberg is right, it does not mean that DFs become useless or redundant, as out of all institutional devices they perhaps fit best with his suggestions of ‘how to organize deliberation in a way that is sensitive to the abilities and needs of those involved’. His remedies include having a diverse set of citizens to encourage them to reflect on their own views and those of others, establishing 'positive socio-emotional relationships among the participants’ by meeting several times, the number of citizens should not be too large, and a small group discussions should be used, and the assembled citizens should be given other tasks to collectively organise other than discussing the issue. Finally, the role of the facilitator is absolutely key to ensure equal inclusive debate, but also to assist in developing their analytical, evaluative and communicative skills.

**Data Analysis**

In the research proposal it is detailed that the transcripts from the DFs will be analysed. One potential way to analyse these is the Discourse Quality Index (DQI). This is a theoretically-grounded measurement instrument that enables researchers to quantitatively code and analyse the deliberative nature of political speech acts (Steiner *et al*. 2004). It emerges principally from a Habermasian view of communicative rationality, in which reasoned exchange is presented as *the* means of encouraging preference change and consensus. More specifically, Habermas’s (1996) ‘ideal speech situation’ acts as a major evaluative touchstone against which the DQI measures deliberative politics in action which Steiner *et al.* (2004: 19-24) identify as having six key elements: all citizens should be able to participate equally without constraint or coercion; all who are participating should articulate their views in a truthful manner; all assertions and validity claims should be logically justified; arguments should be orientated towards the common good; participants should listen to and respect the arguments of others; and, finally, participants should allow the force of better argument to prevail. Steiner *et al.* (2004) then operationalise each of these elements by reformulating them as dimensions upon which speech acts can be coded and subsequently measured. The DQI was originally designed to measure the deliberative quality of parliamentary debates (Steiner *et al.* 2004), but it has subsequently been revised to be more applicable to citizen debates such as mini-publics (Steiner 2012). The coding categories allow speech acts to be assessed in terms of their deliberative character. Coding commences as soon as a protagonist makes a demand, defined simply as ‘a proposal of some sort by an individual or a group on what decisions should or should not be made’ (Steiner *et al.* 2004, p.170). In this project the DQI statistical results could be combined with the DFs participants’ survey results to see if there is a significant connection between deliberative quality and preference change of the post-deliberation preferences. This can help overcome the problem highlighted above about understanding what has caused the preferences to change in the DF.

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