

## EXPLORING PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS INFLUENCING DELIBERATION

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### ABSTRACT

In contemporary societies there is a growing need to coordinate and legitimize different perspectives. Instead of a dialogical search for consensus polarizing communication still prevails. The legitimacy of formal political institutions and conventional forms of political participation is in decline; increasingly publicly expressed people's need for a greater influence on social developments reveals a deficit in approaches how to include them more actively in discussions on complex social problems. There has been a growing number of theoretical and empirical appeals to advance deliberation within governmental bodies and public institutions, as well as in a form of direct citizen involvement in (organized) face-to-face meetings. Yet, no radical shift has been made (so far), largely due to poor understanding of subjective and intersubjective (psychological) aspects of deliberation – the exploration of these aspects is the aim of this article. The case is being made for using till now unstudied influence of attachment style on the quality of deliberation and on the readiness to transform and coordinate attitudes with others in a deliberative process.

### KEY WORDS

deliberation, democracy, attachment style, attitudes, group

### CLASSIFICATION

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## INTRODUCTION

In pluralist fragmented societies there is a growing need to coordinate divided perspectives on issues of public concern in order to reach more legitimate solutions. The increase in information flow and communication channels, enabled by the advance in information and communication technologies, has not (yet) improved proportionally the quality of public discourse. The historically important role of rational argument and debate in the western public sphere instead of a dialogical search for consensus led to the prevalence of polarizing communication preventing efficient cooperation when seeking solutions to accumulated problems [1-3]. The legitimacy of formal political institutions and conventional forms of political participation is in decline [4-6]. Various authors have indeed pointed out the trends such as a withdrawal from public life into privatism, individualism [7, 8], the decline in social capital in terms of the reduction of organizational and associational ties outside the home and workplace [9], but at the same time, we almost daily witness the emergence of new movements, protests, strikes, networks and associations working towards community cooperation (the Arab Spring, 1000 Round Tables in Israel, protests in Greece and Spain, the Occupy Movement, Subversive forum Zagreb, Imagine Chicago, Imagine Nepal etc.). This points toward people's need for a greater influence on social developments, revealing a deficit in approaches how to include people more actively in discussions on complex social problems.

The theoretical, empirical and practical interest in participatory approaches, which promise to revitalize democracy, and improvement of the accountability, legitimacy and responsiveness of decision-making, has been growing rapidly in the West ever since the mid-1980s. There is increasing number of programs, organizations and initiatives undertaken with the aim to increase the quality of the public's opinions or concrete political decisions through face-to-face deliberation on pressing policy issues (among best known and established are Deliberative Polls, National Issues Forums, Citizens Juries, Study Circles, Planning Cells, Consensus Conferences, Scenario Workshops, and there are plenty other citizens' panels, citizens' summits, town meetings etc.). Many deliberations are also run via the Internet (for example convened by meetup.org, moveon.org, e-thepeople.org; and even software such as UnChat has been designed to facilitate deliberations). There has been a growing number of academic appeals to boost the significance of deliberation within governmental bodies and public institutions (i.e., as a feature of representative democracy), as well as in a form of direct citizen involvement in (organized) face-to-face meetings (see e.g. [10-16]).

More than ten years ago, Dryzek [17] has announced the "deliberative turn" in the theoretical investigation of democracy. The significance of that concept is also reflected in an immense growth of empirical approaches to the study of deliberation during the last years (including the so-called empirical turn in studies of deliberative democracy). However, there is no consensus on the definition of deliberation, on how quality deliberation should look or how it should be measured. What is common, though, to all the existing, albeit heterogeneous, theoretical-empirical conceptualizations and practical applications of deliberation, is the understanding that it is a careful and respectful consideration of information and diverse points of view on the issue that affects diverse stakeholders and has relevance on societal level. Deliberation implies that actors listen to each other, reasonably justify their policy positions, show mutual respect and reflect upon and evaluate their interests and needs from the point of view of their generalizability [18].

The majority of the existing literature on democratic deliberation still has a philosophical orientation with an emphasis on the crucial role of rational argumentation and impartiality on the part of the participants. However, in line with more recent emphasis [19, 20] on the

necessity of moving from abstract ideals to conceptualizations considering human psychology, institutional frameworks, and patterns of social inequality, recent years have seen ever louder calls for a broader conceptualization of deliberation (also called dialogical or relational) which includes in the conceptualization and analysis of deliberative processes the emotional, identity, value and interpersonal aspects and alternative communication forms (e.g., story-telling, bargaining, rhetorics, humour, personal experiences sharing) [21-27].

For example, the Discourse Quality Index (DQI) [28, 29], presently the most elaborate approach to the analysis of deliberation in different spheres, originally derived from Habermas' notion of discourse ethics, consists of the following deliberative standards: openness to participation, justification of assertions, consideration of the common good, respect for all participants, counterarguments and others' demands, interactivity, constructive politics, authenticity or honesty (or type I deliberative standards) [28] and in the recent years also story-telling and bargaining (type II deliberative standards) [30, 31].

Even if we consider the socio-emotional and some other "irrational" discursive forms (e.g. self-interest) as deliberative, empirical research shows that participants in discussions do not function deliberatively most of the times [31]. The disillusionment regarding the implementation of well-argued and just discourse in deliberative processes may, on the one hand, lead to the disillusion of the deliberative ideal; on the other, it calls for a more comprehensive analysis of the factors that foster or hinder deliberation.

Research is especially lacking in the area of subjective and intersubjective (psychological) aspects, both in institutional contexts and in small-group public deliberations [20, 32]. As Elster [33; p.14], vividly argues: "theories of deliberative democracy mostly neglect elementary facts of human psychology." Several authors [19, 20] have pointed out the absence of exploration on the influence of intersubjective orientations on deliberation quality, i.e. how participants in a deliberative process perceive other participants and how they interpret other participants' 2 of themselves. Participants in deliberative processes have usually been classified only on the basis of their demographic characteristics and social background [34, 35].

Deliberation is enacted through discourse; the quality of deliberative outcomes thus varies with the discursive quality [36]. One of the criteria for assessing the success of deliberation is transformation of attitudes on the subject in question at the individual level and resulting convergence at the group level. This shift is far from being achieved very often [31, 37]. Factors that influence it are diverse and also under-researched so far [38, 39], as are psychological factors that affect the transformational potential of attitudes and readiness to harmonize own attitudes with those of others [40, 37].

Therefore, there have been quite some calls to investigate of individual, psychological factors stimulating or hindering deliberation, not only cognitive ones, but also personality [37], affective [41, 42], and motivational factors [43], and also interpersonal and group dynamics in deliberative processes [20, 32, 44]. Black et al. [39], giving the most exhaustive review of the existing methods of measuring various aspects of deliberative processes, expect "that future studies will refine considerably the measures", especially regarding the psychological factors influencing quality of deliberation and outcomes of deliberative processes [39; p.4].

What follows in this article, is firstly a short overview of the existing findings about intrapersonal factors influencing deliberation. Secondly, argument is made for the influence of attachment styles on the quality of deliberation in terms of process and the outcomes – (the readiness for) transformation and coordination of attitudes with others in a deliberative process. Namely, besides being a prominent theory of interpersonal relationships in recent

decades, in recent years the attachment theory proved to be extraordinarily useful in enhancing the understanding of individual differences in group-related performance [45, 46], and characteristics and transformational potentials of attitudes [47-49]. And finally, a proposal for empirical work is made.

## **ATTITUDINAL AND PERSONALITY FACTORS INFLUENCING DELIBERATION**

By definition, deliberation requires from participants to be motivated to debate and to be informed about the topic under discussion (these are two items that are in themselves difficult to achieve in contemporary democracies). In addition, a number of psychological factors have influence on individual's and group's ability to deliberate well and (consequently) on their readiness to change their attitudes; these are not solely cognitive factors which received most attention so far [50], but primarily affective and personality factors. The emphasis on the latter is connected with acknowledging the significance of these factors for successful deliberation in recent years [41, 42].

Psychological factors influencing deliberation can be interpreted in two different ways: in dispositional terms implying that the observed ways of psychological functioning originate in the more or less permanent traits of people; and in functional terms, implying that cognitive and personality functioning depends, to a major degree, on situational factors – i.e., in a large proportion of people these characteristics are malleable to a significant degree [32]. There are good theoretical and empirical arguments on behalf of the functional approach.

The existing research [37, 40] suggests that participants' **ideological bias** has negative impact on deliberation and the likelihood of attitude change in general and changes in the direction of group convergence in particular, while certain personality traits have positive impact. In deliberations, liberal and conservative participants [51] usually move apart from one another attitudinally, with the former more strongly endorsing liberal beliefs and more clearly rejecting conservative ones, and vice versa. Ideologically moderate participants develop more favorable views of liberal beliefs when in predominantly liberal groups, and shift toward conservative view in relatively conservative groups [51]. Wojcieszak [52, 53] arrived at a similar conclusion, emphasizing that **strong attitudes** are very resistant to change and affect the ways in which people process messages, and consequently, their ways of deliberation. Furthermore, she argues that attitude strength is a multi-dimensional construct with many components, for example importance, intensity, certainty, extremity, which, in turn, exert differential effects in the context of deliberation. Especially attitude extremity and intensity which are emotionally based seem to present a hindrance for the reconsideration of biases [52].

As regards the **personalities** of deliberation participants, it has been shown that a move toward common ground or consensus is facilitated by relatively extraverted and conscientious groups respectively by open, expressive, careful participants [37]. Another relevant finding of this study is that the group-level shifts in opinion are related to self-reported deliberativeness, not to observer ratings [37]. It has also been shown that deliberativeness and readiness to transform and harmonize attitudes with those of other participants in deliberative forums are influenced by social value orientations (i.e., cooperation vs. competition and self-interest), high vs. low need for achieving a stable and secure knowledge (need for cognitive closure – i.e. consensus vs. dissent seekers), and a tendency to undertake complex and demanding cognitive tasks (need for cognition, i.e. persuasive and assertive vs. uncertain and ineffective citizens) [54].

The research studies on the psychological factors that influence the attitudes formation and personal ideologies are gaining currency outside the context of deliberative process research

as well [55, 56, 51, 57, 58]. One finding that should be highlighted is the substantial influence of (dispositional or/and situational) (in)security on human functioning. Generally, when people feel insecure, they tend to be more defensive, rigid, aggressive and sensitive to (perceived) emotional threats. Conversely, when people feel secure, they tend to be more open, flexible, pro-social and resilient. And there are more and more proofs showing that individuals' attitudes move in one direction or another as a function of individuals' sense of security or insecurity. At the same time, there are also proofs that situational factors that increase psychological security may override dispositional insecurity.

## **DELIBERATION AND ATTACHMENT STYLES**

Until now, attachment styles have not been taken into account in theoretical-empirical studies of deliberation, although they seem to be highly relevant given their obvious and significant influence on the functioning of individuals within groups and on the shaping of ideologies and attitudes.

Conceptually and methodologically, two approaches to attachment styles can be distinguished: the categorical which assigns each individual to one (pre-defined) attachment style, and the dimensional which measures individuals with regard to anxiety and avoidance. Individuals are then categorized on this basis (the categories' names vary from one author to another). Measuring instruments are also diverse; researchers use either qualitative interviews that require complex qualitative interpretation or self-evaluation questionnaires.

Generally speaking, attachment style is determined by the cumulative experience of attachment to important others in interpersonal relations, can be conceptualized as the combination of two basic continuous dimensions: avoidance and anxiety [59]. Persons scoring low in interpersonal anxiety and avoidance dimensions correspond to the secure style and are characterized by a history of reliable, predictable, and stable interactions with significant others, self-confidence, confidence in others' availability and trustworthiness, and comfort with closeness. Persons with high levels of attachment anxiety in social interactions and interpersonal relationships compulsively desire closeness, have intense needs to be accepted, supported, and admired, and at the same time fear potential rejection. They view others as inconsistent and appraise themselves negatively. Their primary relational goal is to reach security. Persons scoring high on interpersonal attachment avoidance are uncomfortable with intimacy, self-disclosure, interdependence, closeness. They perceive others as untrustworthy, and view themselves as autonomous (avoid relationships, deny the need for closeness) or as undeserving of closeness with control over others as their primary relationship goal [60, 61].

The results from different national samples involving various population categories show that from approximately half to two thirds respondents at the most are securely attached [62]. This implies that we can expect that one third to one half of individuals in deliberative groups will be highly anxious and/or avoidant.

Importantly, research evidence suggests that attachment styles tend to be rather stable from infancy to adulthood [63], nevertheless some authors see them more prone to change, especially with the individual's conscious efforts such as through therapy and mindfulness [64]. Also across relationships, it has been shown that people hold multiple working models organised as a hierarchy [65]. A general, global model is most accessible and is applied when interacting with new people, whereas more specific models concerning types of relationship and particular relationships are activated and applied when interacting with relevant others [66].

Attachment styles have recently begun to be studied in relation to groups as well. Group attachment styles were first postulated by Smith, Murphy and Coats [45]. Using their respondents' most important social group, they showed that individuals' attachment to group construct accurately predicts emotions concerning the group, time and activities shared with a group, social support, collective self-esteem and ways of resolving conflict in the context of a group. In line with Bowlby's [67] notion about the generalization of attachment styles to new interactions and relationships, Rom and Mikulincer [46] showed that in functional, task-oriented small groups interpersonal attachment anxiety contributes to the experience of group attachment anxiety, and interpersonal attachment avoidance contributes to the formation of group attachment avoidance. Given the proven high correlation between attachment styles in interpersonal and group contexts, we will measure only group attachment styles.

More concretely, group attachment anxiety was, for example, characterized by a sense of being unworthy, vulnerable, helpless as a group member, by worries regarding acceptance by a group, appraisal of group interactions as a threat, negative emotional reaction toward them, lower appraisal of group-related self-efficacy. Group attachment avoidance was characterized by the appraisal of closeness to groups as unnecessary and the tendency to avoid dependence on groups or group interdependency. The higher the attachment avoidance, the lower the appraisal of group as a challenge, the higher the negative emotions that group elicits, the more negative the representation of other group members, and the higher the endorsement of distance/self-reliance goals [46]. In terms of individual's contribution to group outcomes, attachment anxiety is associated with impaired instrumental functioning; and attachment avoidance with impaired socio-emotional functioning. Namely, anxiously attached persons' hyperactivating strategies lead them to be more focused on maintaining the positive emotional tone of group interactions than on contributing to task completion. Because desire to be accepted and loved and desire to feel close to others, supported by them is their main preoccupation, they direct psychological resources mainly to the promotion of an atmosphere of acceptance and support among group members and the resolution of any intragroup conflict that could damage this atmosphere. As a result, these hyperactivating strategies draw resources away from task-oriented goals [46]. On the other hand, avoidant persons' deactivating strategies foster a search for emotional and social distance which leads to a dismissal of the socio-emotional realm of group interactions and leads avoidant persons to invest time and energy in the completion of group tasks that do not require any emotional involvement with the group. Their contribution to the promotion of closeness and consensus among group members is poor; in their wish to distance themselves from the group they often even create overt conflicts with other group members [46].

As regards the links between (interpersonal) attachment styles and personal political ideologies (defined and measured as different covariates of unidimensional category – liberalism vs. conservatism), the majority of research evidence links secure attachment to liberalism or covariates of liberalism, and both insecure attachment styles to conservatism or covariates of conservatism. For example, Weber and Federico [47] demonstrated the connection between insecure attachment (avoidant or anxious-ambivalent) and right wing authoritarianism and social dominance orientation.

Many research findings also point out that the readiness or the lack of readiness to change attitudes depends on a particular attachment dimension. For example, securely attached individuals exhibit greater curiosity and information-seeking; lower levels of cognitive closure, mental rigidity, and ethnic stereotyping [68]; greater openness toward outgroup members [69]; a reduced tendency toward worldview defense [70]. Anxious and avoidant attachment have been linked with covariates of (mental) conservatism, including preference for order and predictability, intolerance of ambiguity, dogmatism, and mental rigidity [68];

severe judgments of social transgressions [70]; reliance on stable (and negative) stereotypes when evaluating outgroup members [68, 69]; and an unwillingness to interact with outgroup members [69].

## CONCLUSIONS

Taking into account existing theoretical-empirical findings, it seems that (group) attachment styles are a theoretical and empirical construct that promises to reduce the lacking understanding of psychological factors influencing deliberation process. This construct seems especially valuable since it comprises intra-, interpersonal and group functioning; and at the same time cognitive and affective level. Attachment styles seem to be significantly and directly connected with the initial attitudes, and also with the transformation and convergence of attitudes in individuals and group as a whole in a deliberation process. Furthermore, they seem to influence significantly quality of deliberation of both individuals and groups.

Therefore I propose that further research should test the relation between the levels of anxiety and avoidance in individuals and (deliberation) groups, and their attitudes at the beginning of the deliberation process, the changeability of these attitudes in terms of group convergence, and also the relation of these two attachment dimensions with meeting deliberative standards from the communication viewpoint.

A deeper understanding of conditions potentially hindering successful deliberation would help developing more effective deliberation processes, strengthening deliberative competence of all (potential) actors in the public formal and informal public sphere and establishing/building trust in deliberation processes.

This is particularly challenging in Slovenia as a post-transition country with a relatively short democratic tradition, a history of unique Yugoslav system of self-management (that turned into a kind of formal rituals that had no significance in the decision-making process), ideologically polarized (also due to the war and post-war trauma) and underdeveloped deliberative theory and practice.

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## ISTRAŽIVANJE PSIHOLOŠKIH FAKTORA KOJI UTJEČU NA NAMJERU

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### SAŽETAK

U suvremenim društvima rastuća je potreba koordiniranja i ozakonjenja različitih perspektiva. Umjesto dijaloške potrage za konsenzusom i nadalje prevladava polarizirajuća komunikacija. Legitimost formalnih političkih institucija i konvencionalnih oblika političkog sudjelovanja je u opadanju; rastuće i javno iskazivane potrebe ljudi za većim utjecajem na društveni razvoj ukazuju na nedostatnost pristupa njihovog aktivnijeg uključivanja u

diskusije o kompleksnim društvenim problemima. Rastući je broj teorijskih i eksperimentalnih poziva za unaprijeđivanje promišljanja unutar vladinih tijela i institucija, kao i u obliku izravnog uključivanja građana na (organiziranim) izravnim skupovima. Ipak, (do sada) nije bilo radikalne promjene, većim dijelom zbog slabog razumijevanja subjektivnih i intersubjektivnih (psiholoških) vidova promišljanja. Istraživanje tih vidova cilj je ovog rada. Upotrijebljen je do sada nerazmatran utjecaj stila privrženosti na kvalitetu prosuđivanja i na spremnost za promjenu i koordiniranje stavova s drugima tijekom procesa prosuđivanja.

### **KLJUČNE RIJEČI**

promišljanja, demokracija, stil privrženosti, stavovi, grupa