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Theory and Practice of Deliberative Policy Analysis

The promise and challenges of deliberative policy analysis

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Abstract: Deliberative policy analysis (DPA) has become a major approach to post-positivist policy inquiry. The status quo of this field, however, is both inspiring and unsatisfying. This paper attempts to revisit and reflect DPA's development and explore the road ahead. The paper starts with a brief introduction of DPA, including its concept, principles, and promise. The next section discusses three challenges facing the emerging field. The last part offers several thoughts for future study.

Keywords: deliberative policy analysis (DPA), deliberative think tank (DTT), challenges

1. Introduction

Since the release of the edited book of Hajer and Wagenaar (2003), deliberative policy analysis (briefly DPA) has provided further momentum for post-positivist policy inquiry (Fischer and Forester, 1993; Fischer and Gottweis, 2012).

Hajer and Wagenaar's book covers a broad range of issues relevant to the DPA topic, including policy conflicts and deliberation in the networked society, policy discourse and

policy practice, and discussion about its theoretical foundations. Rather than precisely defining what DPA is and how to practice it, the book brought a new mode of policy analysis and offered a direction for further exploration.

Fourteen years' development of DPA, in my observation, is both inspiring and unsatisfying. Generally introduced in a number of handbook chapters (e.g., Dryzek, 2016a; Stevenson, 2016; Fischer and Boossabong, 2017), DPA has been enjoying a growing visibility in the academic community. There have also been more specific studies. For instance, some discussed cases with a DPA perspective (e.g., Hajer, 2004) , and some reflected the DPA practices in particular national settings (e.g., Li and He, 2016; Boossabong and Fischer, 2016).

Such progress, however, is limited, compared to interpretive policy analysis (briefly IPA, see Yanow 1995, 2007; Wagenaar, 2006), another prominent branch of post-positivist policy inquiry, as the latter has been institutionalized through many associational, publishing, educational efforts and annual international conferences (van Bommel et al., 2014). Compared with IPA, DPA has witnessed only tepid research interest and limited theoretical development.

The wide gap between DPA and IPA regarding theoretical institutionalization suggests that it is time for scholars and practitioners to revisit and reflect DPA's theoretical advancement and practical attempts and explore the road ahead. The paper argues that DPA has the potential to grow as an alternative approach to mainstream policy analysis. To be specific, by taking several challenges seriously and deepening its theory and practice, DPA could have a more promising future.

The following part of the paper starts with a brief introduction of DPA, including the concept, its principles, its difference from traditional policy approaches, and the potential roles of DPA in policymaking. The next section presents three challenges hindering the theoretical and practical development of DPA. In the last part, I suggest some future research topics and offer thoughts for moving forward.

2. The concept and promises of DPA

2.1 What is DPA?

There is no widely acknowledged definition of DPA. Rather, scholars define DPA loosely by several core factors. For instance, Hajer and Wagenaar (2003) highlight that DPA is interpretative, practice-oriented, and deliberative. Later on, Hajer (2004) brings an analytic model of DPA consisting of discourse, dramaturgy, and deliberation as three dimensions. Stevenson (2014) believes that deliberation and discourse analysis are two pillars for DPA. In sum, two components are repeatedly discussed by post-positivists under the umbrella of DPA: the interpretive aspect of DPA and deliberation among different discourses or discourse coalitions.

To present an explicit argument and avoid confusion, I define DPA more narrowly and self-evidently: DPA is a specific kind of policy inquiry based on a public deliberation forum involving relevant parties and participants, aiming to provide insights for policy makers or collaborative partners. Such a definition has the following implications:

First of all, my understanding of DPA underlines “public deliberation” and places a deliberation process at the core of policy inquiry, which exactly is what the “deliberative”

implies. Interpretive tools, such as discourse analysis and narrative analysis, can be employed in a DPA practice, but unnecessarily be an unseparated part of DPA. That is to say, the linkages between DPA and interpretive approaches are contingent. A less emphasis on the interpretive aspect may be helpful to differentiate DPA from other post-positivist policy approaches, like IPA.

Second, binding DPA and a public deliberation process together will be essential for making DPA operable, which is vital for this emerging approach — I will explore this point later in the paper. There has been a rich toolset for public deliberation, including many well-designed deliberative techniques, for example, citizen jury, deliberative polling, consensus conference, and so on, many of which have guidelines available for step-by-step operation (Gastil and Levine, 2005; Lukensmeyer and Torres, 2006). With a public deliberation process being its cornerstone and with the deliberation toolset at hand, DPA would not be just empty talk.

Third, “involving relevant parties and participants” means that the public deliberation process shall be inclusive. Ideally, those who are eligible to attend the deliberation forum are better to include not only partisan stakeholders but also relevant government agencies and lay citizens, so as to cover public interests and concerns of governmental authorities, as well as competing partial or private interests.

Fourth, I prefer to limit the DPA efforts to those based on a designed deliberative forum. Public deliberation may occur in an ad hoc forum or the wider deliberative system (Dryzek, 2016b). A designed deliberative forum can be easily managed and is more likely to generate productive results for analysis. In practice, the deliberative forum employed in DPA can either

be a partisan forum or a non-partisan forum, involving larger citizenry, or a hybrid forum. Regardless of the forum form, the involved parties and participants can be regarded as collaborative partners (Ansell and Gash, 2008).

Last but not least, the main purpose of DPA in practice is to supply insights for policy makers or collaborative partners. What I want to emphasize is that DPA is a kind of analysis for use instead of a self-thinking of the analysts. I will elaborate on this point in the following sections.

2.2 The principles of DPA

Mainstream policy analysis emphasizes the technical aspects of a policy and separates the analysis from public engagement. On the contrary, DPA tries to reclaim the value of democracy and put public participation and deliberation at the heart of policy making and policy analysis. The principles of DPA include (Li, 2015; Li and He, 2016):

First, DPA focuses on values in a broad sense and treats the different appeals and concerns of groups as the starting point of policy inquiry. It is primarily interpretive rather than empirical.

Second, the deliberative inquiry of policy is designed to be integrated with and receive inputs from public participation and deliberation. During the process, stakeholders are expected to engage in the deliberative interaction directly and contribute their local knowledge and problem-solving capacities.

Third, it takes the dialog and argumentation among stakeholders, instead of data and models, as basic units of analysis, and develops its inquiry on the basis of communicative or

collaborative rationality.

Fourth, DPA redefines the role of policy analysts. Policy analysts are no longer advisers selling ideas to their clients. Rather, they are supposed to provide support not only to traditional government decision makers but also to all collaborative partners, so as to guarantee more balanced participation, effective deliberation, and consensus building.

2.3 The promise of DPA

DPA's potential rests on its two advantages. First, DPA is suitable for many policy settings. In two specific scenarios, DPA would be highly valuable and can be used as a primary framework of policy inquiry. The first situation is when policy making heavily depends on public input, so as to acquire necessary information or build acceptance. The other case is when there are notable conflicts or disputes regarding a messy policy issue, owing to divergent perspectives, interests, or values; moreover, there is a lack of an effective and institutionalized mechanism to handle the conflicts or disputes. In a word, DPA perfectly adapts to the requirement of collaborative governance (see e.g., Ansell and Gash, 2008) or the demand of policy analysis in a network society (Hajer and Wagenaar, 2003).

The second advantage is that, as will be discussed in the following pages, interactive deliberation may lead to reflection, negotiation, and sometimes consensus building, which can be used to inform future collaborative actions. As such, the action-driven analysis is different from the subjective interpretation advocated by interpretive analysts. In other words, it means that DPA can work as a practical methodology for supporting the real-world policy making.

3. Challenges facing DPA

More than a decade after the edited volume by Hajer and Wagenaar was published, DPA still suffers from its limited theoretical and practical progress. The realm of policy analysis is still predominated by positivist discourse and such predominance seems self-strengthening. DPA, by comparison, is still attempting to gain more spotlight. Moreover, even in post-positivists' own domain, DPA has been consistently marginalized and has played a much less important role than that of IPA. Here I bring three significant challenges facing DPA for further discussion.

3.1 How to improve the DPA approach and make it more operable

If we expect DPA to grow as a competitive alternative approach in the world of policy analysis, and a powerful tool in the toolset of policy analysts, DPA must be operable. It means that there are one or more working processes for analysts to use. They may use the processes to guide their DPA practice, flexibly, rather than rigidly, from starting the DPA initiative, through step-by-step advancing, to arriving at insights of policy inquiry.

This is exactly how the mainstream policy analysis based on rational policy-making model, succeeds. Indeed, there has a widely acknowledged operable mode of the mainstream policy analysis: investigating, setting goals for decision making, considering and ranking criteria, inventing options, evaluating, comparing, and optimizing, checking sensitivity and feasibility, and finally recommending preferred policy solutions. As for IPA, scholars have also made efforts to study how to conduct interpretive policy analysis (e.g., Yanow, 2000; Schwartz-Shea & Dvora Yanow, 2012).

However, this issue of how to make it operable has been neglected by the DPA literature, and the same is also true to the organizational aspect for practicing DPA (Li, 2015). This problem has been pointed out as a more general critique to the argumentative turn. Mayer (1997, p.11), for example, puts: “Most argue persuasively that policy analysis should be participatory but provide very few starting points for its design and evaluation.” A similar view came from Landemore (2014, p.524), who suggests “clear, concrete alternatives to the mainstream operational framework of policy analysis” is needed rather than “just a turn away from something.”

Some take another view about whether or not DPA shall be operationalized. For example, Fischer & Boossabong (2017) argue that “(t)he goal of deliberative policy analysis is not to replace one operational methodology with another. Instead, it is more fundamentally concerns a mode of thinking...”

For some post-positivist researchers, operationalizing is the characteristic of positivist methods, and overemphasizing the steps of the process of DPA practice might lead to the danger of falling into a positivist trap. However, no matter being a policy craft or moving towards an alternative educational program for policy analysis, the mode of DPA is required to be easily disseminated, replicated, and practiced. This tension must be handled very carefully. My idea is, as will be elaborated in the following pages, that the future of DPA relies on to what extent it is operable, and less critical.

3.2 The absence of “analysis”

Most DPA entrepreneurs or advocates have been putting their focus on “deliberation,” with

much less attention being paid to the aspect of “analysis.” As a consequence, it is often hard to distinguish the DPA in their mind from other existing public deliberation efforts. For instance, Dryzek (2016a) brings five images of DPA: seeing DPA as input into conventional policy analysis, as conflict resolution, as public consultation, as a unique source of inputs, and as a governance aspiration. However, if we substitute the “DPA” in Dryzek’s statement with “deliberation,” that is to say, the five images of deliberation, the statement still stands. In a similar way, when a DPA-relevant case was mentioned in an article or book chapter, too often the case is mainly focusing on a collaborative process or deliberative process (e.g., Innes and Booher, 2003) or the competing of several discourses (e.g., Hajer, 2004), with the “analysis” actually being absent.

After all, deliberative policy analysis is a kind of analysis. Then, how to understand the “analysis” will be an unavoidable question raised for the DPA advocates. So far, this issue has not been well addressed.

What shall be analyzed? How to do the analysis? What are the outputs of the analyzing process? Who will receive the outputs or care about the results of an analysis, and how to use these results? For the mainstream positivist policy analysts, they have answered these five questions. DPA theorists must also have their answers. As a particular kind of analysis, DPA must be used to inform people, especially showing people something that they are hard to realize all by themselves. Otherwise, we are unable to separate DPA from public deliberation, and the deliberative analysts can only inform themselves.

3.3 Lack of purposeful and designed pilot practice

As discussed above, the theory and methods of DPA are highly relevant to the policy practice in the real world. Therefore, DPA shall also be a methodology. To push the study of DPA forward, purposeful pilot practice would be a must, which could be employed to test and improve theory. Some DPA cases have been elaborated in the existing literature. However, we can hardly regard them as purposeful and well-designed. Most of these case studies seem to focus on some kind of afterthought reflections instead of intentional policy-analysis attempt. What we can see mostly is about a narrative of the case story and an introduction of the corresponding collaborative process, by using the DPA language. In other words, these studies usually unfold a case from the perspectives of public deliberation or discourse analysis, without a mention of a prior plan for how to conduct the deliberative analysis in a concrete scenario.

4. Several thoughts for future study

With the reflections in mind, how, then, shall we handle these challenges and promote the theory and practice of DPA? Here I attempt to offer several thoughts for future study: putting more emphasis on the consulting function of DPA and focusing on the outputs generated during the “analysis” process of DPA efforts, taking a procedural perspective and incorporating consensus building into the deliberation process, exploring the possibility and design of deliberative think tanks, conducting more purposeful pilot practice, and inventing a deliberation-oriented policy analysis curriculum as an educational alternative.

4.1 Underscoring the importance of DPA’s consulting function

Mainstream policy analysis can serve many purposes, a primary one of which is providing consultation for policy makers. This is also true for DPA. The value of a DPA practice depends on how many insights it can contribute to policy makers and involved partners, and how well it can inform collaborative policy making. Therefore, we must figure out what kind of results a DPA effort could generate, and what a DPA report looks like.

A DPA report is supposed to help collaborative partners to have a clearer picture regarding the following questions (Li, 2015). What are the stance and concerns of citizens and relevant stakeholders? How do they frame the issue and use different narratives, discourses, or evidence? What are the major disputes about? Are there contradictions between evidence? If so, which can sustain credibility after deliberating and joint-fact checking? What are the favorable policy options for each stakeholder? What are the possible impacts or consequences of these options for different parties? Are there jointly acceptable and workable solutions that satisfy all sides? If positive, what is the learning path toward the win-win policy solutions? Otherwise, what are the remaining disputes and what are the difficulties for reducing divergence?

DPA is able to play an important role of consulting in both an authoritarian context and a democratic setting. In authoritarian countries like China, there is no regime-level participation, but often exists governance-level deliberative efforts, referred as authoritarian deliberation (He and Warren, 2011). Having such a DPA report in hand, public officials who can make the final call can acquire a more comprehensive and deeper understanding of the policy issue and related controversies, and should be more likely to make a wiser decision (Li and He, 2016). In a more democratic setting where a decision is made in a collaborative manner, all the

involved sides can also learn much from the DPA report, acquiring more insights about the messy situation, disputes, conflicting evidence, and how to reach possible agreements.

4.2 Taking a procedural perspective and incorporating consensus building

Since DPA is based on a public deliberation forum, the procedure of conducting DPA is very similar to its corresponding deliberation process. A salient difference between a DPA process and a deliberation process lies in that the former highlights observing and analyzing what has happened in the deliberation, so as to collect data needed in a DPA report.

To better inform the relevant parties or citizens and produce valuable and insightful DPA report, it would be best to integrate the public deliberation process with subsequent consensus building. I acknowledge that there are different views regarding the relationship between deliberative democracy and conflict resolution. Some argue that interest-based dispute resolution and deliberative democracy's respective orientations to conflict are quite different (e.g., Aragaki, 2009). And the aspiration to consensus has been abandoned by many deliberative democrats, who believe that deliberation can co-exist with other procedures for reaching collective decisions, such as voting (Dryzek, 2016a). Compared to these theoretical discussions, I'd like to suggest a pragmatic view toward the integration of public deliberation with consensus building in the DPA context. Under most policy-making circumstances, disputes are mainly relevant to interests instead of values or beliefs. A subsequent consensus building effort at the end of the deliberation doesn't mean rejecting other ways of collective decision making. Rather, it could bring additional benefits for the DPA analysis, enriching what can be observed and enlightened in the interactive process, especially those about the

jointly acceptable solutions and the possible learning path toward them. Even if there is no consensus at all at the end of this process, the effort of building consensus still pays off — it tells people more about why the policy disputes cannot be easily resolved. In a word, incorporating consensus building into the deliberation forum could strengthen the capacities of DPA by making in-depth inquiry and deepening its findings.

4.3 Providing organizational solutions for practicing DPA

Since it is based on a public deliberation and dispute resolution process, a purposeful DPA effort must be very complicated, and consequently, will involve a number of professionals. Only a team, rather than an individual analyst, can handle such a complicated intellectual project. Thus, we shall study how to organize and coordinate the DPA activities, and how to arrange the labor division of the team members.

The research on DPA shall have a focus on its organizational aspect. As is known, without the rise of modern think tanks, mainstream policy analysis could hardly acquire its current influence and social impact. Similarly, practices of DPA also need some kind of organizational solution. In this light, the present author have suggested an organizational solution for DPA practice, referred as think tank 2.0 (Li, 2015) or deliberative think tank (Li, 2016). The author has also presented two models, an external model and an internal model. The former illustrates the relations between think tank 2.0 and other actors in a policy system, including decision makers, citizens and stakeholders, and positivist policy analysts or traditional think tanks. And the latter depicts the four core roles in a DPA team, deliberative analysts, public engagement professionals, facilitators/mediators for dispute resolution and

consensus building, and subject experts, outlining their division of labor and respective responsibilities.

4.4 Conducting purposeful pilot practices

With the organizational solution, procedural guidelines, and the template of the final report, DPA could develop a methodological orientation, becoming an operable approach beyond merely a normative advocacy. This would lay the foundation for purposeful pilot practice.

We could start pilot attempts in the policy arena full of disputes, like planning, regulating, resources management, community development, and so on. By a purposeful practice, I mean that DPA analysis shall be carried on at the same time that the policy disputes are unfolding and before the decisions regarding the policy issues are made, and there shall be well-prepared team and well-designed process of deliberation and conflict resolution. Furthermore, the DPA report shall be forwarded to the participated parties, individuals and the wider public. Their opinion change and evaluation of the received information from the report is better to be measured, so DPA theory and models can be examined and improved after such a pilot practice.

The laboratory for deliberative policy analysis, which was launched by the present author, has taken this kind of practice as one of its priorities (Li and He, 2016). A recent example is our DPA attempt in a collaborative governance setting, conducting deliberative analysis for a rule-making for parking at Beijing's Hutong (a type of narrow alleys in the old town of Beijing) area (Li and Wang, 2017).

4.5 Promoting educational efforts

MPA/MPP programs have incentives to distinguish themselves (Pal and Clark, 2016). However, a positivist approach to policy analysis seems to continue to dominate the syllabi of courses, at least in US programs (He et al., 2016). After its theory gets improved and more practice accumulated, DPA has the potential to be integrated into the MPA/MPP programs or relevant curriculum. Possible courses or teaching units might consist of the following content: post-positivism philosophy, the argumentative turn in policy analysis, theory and methodology of deliberative policy analysis, public participation/deliberation, public dispute resolution and multi-party negotiation, facilitating techniques, which cover a considerable range of theoretical foundations, methods, and skills relevant to DPA.

Rather than making a choice between two alternative approaches, positivist or post-positivist, I suggest a mixed policy analysis pedagogy (e.g., Foster et al., 2010). Only in this way, the craft of DPA could be effectively disseminated and DPA could have the opportunity to grow into a competitive mode of policy practice.

5. Concluding remarks

Since the seminal editing efforts by Hajer and Wagenaar, DPA has made some progresses in theory development. However, it is still far to say that DPA has been widely recognized in the policy community, and the status quo of the research and practice in this field remains unsatisfied. Based on the well-developed public deliberation tools, DPA has the potential to grow into an influential policy analysis mode. The paper presents a clear definition of DPA, and identifies three challenges that limit its continued development. Subsequently, this piece

suggests several thoughts for moving its research and practice forward. Indeed, there may be diversified schools of DPA, with different definition, focuses, models, and toolsets, and the critics and directions supplied in this paper only reflect my own perspective. But I hope that this revisit of DPA could stimulate further inquiry and debate.

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