

A critical assessment of Steenbergen et al's Discourse Quality Index

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This paper explores Steenbergen et al's Discourse Quality Index (DQI). The DQI is an attempt to develop an instrument capable of measuring the quality of a discourse. Steenbergen et al intends to base the assessment of discourse quality on the ideals of discourse identified by Habermas. This paper briefly outlines the discourse ethics theory of Habermas that the project draws on. The paper also describes the design and application of the DQI carried out by Steenbergen et al. The paper will then discuss issues around this application; a central problem lies in the DQI's attempt to develop an objective method of judging the quality of discourse. This is inconsistent with the significance placed on subjective and intersubjective features of communication in Habermas' theory. This results in coding instructions that distort and limit the ideals it aims to measure, and the subjective beliefs of the coders being misinterpreted as objective facts about discourse. The paper will consider how these problems are significant in regarding applications of Critical Theory in general; it will argue that the problems encountered in this application do not exclude any application of Critical Theory, although they do highlight the significance of the distinction between the intersubjective and objective within Habermas' theory, and the need for applications to maintain this distinction.

Introduction

This paper concerns the application of discourse ethics to the empirical study of deliberation in political discourse, specifically the application of Steenbergen et al. Steenbergen et al develop a discourse quality index (DQI), an instrument designed to measure the extent to which real life discourse is deliberative (conceived according to the principles prescribed by Habermas' discourse ethics). They apply the DQI to the parliamentary debate titled "women (government priorities)" which took place in the British House of Commons (Steenbergen et al 2003).

This paper first outlines Habermas' discourse ethics; it then outlines Steenbergen et al's DQI. Finally, this paper explores issues raised by this application. This paper argues that the challenges raised against this application suggest fundamental problems with using Habermas' discourse ethics to engage in objective research. However, this paper does not deny that it may be possible, desirable and useful to apply Habermas' theory to social problems, including issues of political deliberation and parliamentary debate.

Discourse Ethics and Deliberative Politics

This paper now outlines Habermas' theory, discourse ethics, and how this relates to deliberative politics. Habermas suggests that any act of communication raises validity claims, anticipating coherence, truthfulness, rightness and sincerity¹. Communication breaks down if these validity claims are challenged – for instance, if a subject deliberately misleads or contradicts himself (Chambers 1996, Habermas 1996b). The validity claim most relevant to discourse ethics (though all have a role) is rightness: when an individual expresses a moral

1. "Coherence" refers to the presence of appropriate logical and semantic conventions. For example, in communication interlocutors presuppose they are speaking the same language. "Truthfulness" requires that the utterance conforms to a state of affairs in the objective world. For example, the utterance "Snow is white" is true only on the occasion that snow is white. A claim of truth in communication presupposes this relation between the utterance and the objective world. "Rightness" requires that an utterance accurately express an intersubjectively accepted social norm. "Sincerity" requires that an utterance accurately express the subjective world of the speaker.

command they raise the validity claim of rightness (Habermas 1996). Habermas suggests that morals cannot be objectively true or false, but must appeal to an intersubjective world of norms (Habermas 1996:180). The speaker's claim may be validated; evidence for this would be intersubjective acceptance of a norm, manifested in actions conforming to a norm. When the claim is rejected a number of outcomes are possible. Interlocutors may attempt to coerce or manipulate one another into conforming to a principle; alternatively they may try to convince one another by appeal to reason (Chambers 1996). Discourse ethics aims to capture this final possibility, since this represents a means of establishing a consensus or norm (that is, an intersubjective recognition evidenced in sincere belief in a norm) not derived from force. Discourse ethics must exclude anything that signifies a breakdown in communication, such as coercion (Chambers 1996, Habermas 1996).

Clearly it is not sufficient to justify a moral claim with a monological appeal to hypothetical individuals, since this would not necessarily reflect an intersubjective norm (Habermas 1996). Furthermore, Habermas claims that individuals should be the "last court of appeal regards their needs and wants" (Habermas in Chambers 1996:102). Thus for a norm to be valid it must be intersubjectively recognised. The best way of adducing this would be through discourse between participants affected by a norm. Habermas identifies the ideals that should be aimed for in order to establish an intersubjectively accepted norm. These ideals are not intended to be attainable: clearly, some moral actions involve coercion, and real life discourses do not allow every possible alternative equal opportunity for various reasons (for example, time constraints). Rather, they indicate desirable goals that should be strived for and anticipated in discourse (Dryzek 1995, Habermas 1996, Chambers 1996).

Habermas suggests three sets of rules concerning discourse ethics, which relate to three levels of argumentation (Chambers 1996). The first requires participants be coherent – to speak the same natural language and adhere to general conventions of semantics and logic. The second requires that participants desire to reach an agreement. To do this effectively they must be sincere, state only what they believe to be a right norm (corresponding with their subjective world), and respect one another's demands and desires as sincere, even if they do not agree with the claims. Participants must not be engaged in strategic discussion, express insincere desires, or try to manipulate or convince other people of a norm by means of threats or bribery, but only by the merits of their argument. The third set of rules aims to ensure that repression and inequality do not obtain in discussion since this would be contrary to the goals of reaching an understanding. This requires participation: any competent speakers affected by the norm should not be denied access to discourse; furthermore, their participation should be free from external and internal coercion. They should be allowed to express any demand or argument, but nonetheless should strive for impartiality and consideration of the common good (Habermas 2005, Chambers 1996, Dryzek 1987).

Deliberative politics suggest that political decisions should derive from discourse. Habermas' ideals of discourse ethics may be used to provide a model for discourse conducted in deliberative politics. The ideals prescribed by the discourse ethics seek to ensure that only the better argument, indicated by genuine consensus, prevails to inform political deci-

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sions (Steenbergen et al 2003, Habermas 2005). This must avoid solutions that are produced as a result of, for example, bribes, strategic manipulation, coercion as a result of party whips, or threats to one's political career. If such factors influenced the decision, this would be unjustified by discourse ethics and deliberative politics. Critical Theory was developed with the intention of being applied to social issues (Habermas 2005, Dryzek 1995, Chambers 1996), and arguably the practical intentions of Critical Theory are integrated into the validity of the theory (Blaug 1997). There is debate concerning the limits of how the theory should be applied or related to practical issues. This paper will examine one application: Steenbergen et al's use of discourse ethics as the model for the DQI and deliberative politics (Steenbergen et al 2003).

Steenbergen et al's Discourse Quality Index

Steenbergen et al produce an interpretation of Habermas' discourse ethics which they use to justify the coding categories of the DQI. Steenbergen et al's interpretation of discourse ethics follows six categories: participation, justification, consideration of the common good, respect, constructive politics, and authenticity. These categories seem to capture the theory accurately; however, there are some peculiarities of emphasis observable in the categories. For example, justification emphasizes the requirement for reason to involve clear links between premise and conclusion. The common good is conceived in terms of appeals to utilitarianism or the good of the least advantaged. Respect is conceived in different "dimensions": it can mean respect towards counter arguments, towards groups, or for demands (Steenbergen et al 2003). These categories and conceptions do not deviate too much from the principles of discourse ethics (though there is less emphasis on the role of participants' own attitudes in validating, for example, a justification); these categories are then operationalised and given coding instructions.

The DQI consists of seven coding categories, intended to capture the principles of Habermas' discourse ethics in terms of observable features in speech. The DQI does not attempt to measure authenticity since Steenbergen et al suggest there is no observable indication of sincerity that is not highly speculative. Steenbergen et al feel that the DQI is nevertheless a helpful measure of deliberative quality. The unit of measure for the DQI is a speech (any uninterrupted utterance). Coders recorded 56 speeches in the debate, while the coding categories relate to the content of each individual speech (Steenbergen et al 2003).

The first coding category identifies participation. It uses two codes, (0) and (1): (0) records an interruption, while (1) records normal participation (or no interruption). For an interruption to be recognized by a coder it must be explicitly acknowledged and objected to by a participant. The second coding category identifies levels of justification. It uses four codes based on the linkage between premise and conclusion – coding instructions break down as follows: (0) no premise (just a demand); (1) inferior justification (premise provided but no linkage); (2) qualified justification (linkage is made); and (3) sophisticated justification (number of linkages made between premises and conclusions). A linkage can be explicit or implicit; an implicit linkage is recorded if coders are convinced that all participants

are aware of a linkage not explicitly made because it is obvious. The third category identifies appeals to the common good, with the following coding instructions: (0) one or more group interests are appealed to; (1) no group interests are appealed to; (2a) the greatest good for the greatest number is appealed to; (2b) the greatest good for the least advantaged is appealed to. These codes are not considered mutually exclusive, and could be coded in one speech. The DQI codes three further categories covering respect, and also a final category covering attempts to reach consensus. The coding instructions follow a similar pattern; respect is coded according to explicit positive or negative statements towards groups, demands, and counter arguments, while consensus is coded according to the presence of mediating proposals in speech (Steenbergen et al 2003). This paper shall not provide full details, since the coding examples given above capture the general method that this paper assesses, and with which these final examples are consistent. Steenbergen et al suggest that it is possible to derive a scale from these codes by which to measure the quality of discourse. An example of the DQI results is given concerning three of the indicators: the median, mean, and standard deviation of the coding results are provided, and can be compared to the minimum and maximum possible result of the codes (Steenbergen et al 2003). This is how discourse is measured.

Evaluation of the DQI

The DQI represents a particular attempt to apply discourse ethics using an objective measure. This paper argues that Steenbergen et al's attempt to operationalise the theory produces conceptions that distort, reduce and omit vital notions of the ideals it aims to measure. This paper will argue that from these criticisms it is possible to identify a tension between the intended objectivity of the measure, the intention of Habermas' theory, and qualities identified by discourse ethics. This paper considers the implications of these challenges for the application of Critical Theory to social issues, and in particular, to deliberative politics.

The DQI's approach to Measuring Discourse

This paper will now demonstrate how the DQI distorts and limits the ideals it aims to measure. For example, the DQI determines normal participation according to whether an interruption is explicitly objected to by a participant or not. This is a great departure from the notion of participation expressed by Habermasian discourse ethics, which suggest that all those affected by a decision should ideally be included (Habermas 1996, Chambers 1996). The DQI does not attempt to measure the extent to which this is achieved. The results of this case study show that the DQI found normal participation (coded (1)) to be possible throughout. However, this does not satisfy the notion of participation used in discourse ethics: for example, the debate concerns policies affecting UK society, particularly women, and these people do not all take part. Arguably not all views are represented; only MPs (those successful in elections) are allowed to comment, and it is arguable that MPs did not cover the spectrum of views available on the subject. Furthermore, it seems reasonable to suppose that there existed potential coercion and pressure regarding views (for example, in terms of

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a statement's implications on the speaker's political career), and interruptions that were not explicitly objected to, but were nonetheless resented. The DQI does not measure these intuitive obstacles to participation. Various forms of reduction can be found in all categories. For example, the categories only consider evidence in speech; they do not consider non-verbal communication that offers a range of factors that could contribute or detract from an ideal. For example, a neutral statement may be delivered sarcastically, or accompanied by non-verbal communication suggesting disrespect or attempts to degrade the other participant, which may be obvious to the interlocutors but not identified by the DQI. Does this suggest a problem for measuring deliberative quality? The DQI claims to measure ideals of speech identified in Habermas' discourse ethics, such as participation, by objectively examining the content of speech. However, it fails to register non-verbal aspects of interaction that inevitably influence discourse. One response may be to introduce more complex coding instructions. This paper will explore considerations that suggest such an exercise would still be insufficient.

Consider the DQI's method of measurement. One must ask what the codes are picking out exactly, and in what way they are relevant to one another. It seems absurd to suggest that the figures assigned to the codes represent units of "ideal discourse". Steenbergen et al state that the codes are scaleable (Steenbergen et al 2003), which suggests that this is the conception intended. The application reveals problems with this approach to understanding discourse quality. For example, one would want to consider successful a discourse which produced genuine consensus through debate, even if for the most part it involved negative but ineffectual speech acts. The DQI does not discriminate between speeches in this way, but understands quality based on an average of the quality it perceives to exist in all speeches.

The notion of effectiveness is a crucial problem for the DQI. It is unclear how one could judge the effect of a speech on the discourse or its outcome, by examining only the content of that speech. Such a judgment would appear to involve considering the subjective dimensions of subsequent speech acts. These considerations appear to be beyond the scope of the objective measurement Steenbergen et al describe; it is explicitly acknowledged that the DQI does not measure "authenticity" because of the limitations of its method. Consequently, the way the DQI understands the quality of discourse is potentially misleading. For example, suppose a debate consisted of speeches that were uninterrupted, respectful and well justified. However, the first speech expressed a persuasive threat to other participants, which dissuaded them from contesting the decisions of that participant. The DQI would appear to give a counter-intuitively favourable assessment of that debate – indeed, the threat might even be coded (2) as a demand with a qualified justification.

The DQI seems to invite the absurd notion of comparing and balancing different aspects of speech. For example, to allow statements declaring that "the justifications were inferior, but the participation was good, so overall the discourse was", does not seem a coherent or desirable usage of discourse ethics theory. Steenbergen et al do not address these issues. Since there is no convincing qualification for the conception of current coding categories, producing more categories in an attempt to capture the theory would seem misconceived. A

final point would be that the test for reliability (comparing two coders results) was unconvincing since both coders were involved in the production of the DQI (Steenbergen et al 2003), and were more likely to have reached consensus over what the categories consisted of, and therefore much less likely to reveal ambiguities in instructions than two coders not involved might be. The criticisms raised suggest that attempting to measure ideals identified by discourse ethics through qualities objectively observable in the content of expressions will be problematic. This paper will now demonstrate how the act of coding does not achieve the objectivity claimed, and suggests that attempting this may be undesirable.

The position of the coders and objectivity

The coders are expected to make judgements on matters that could not possibly retain absolute objectivity, such as the quality of participants' justifications, and the degree of respect that participants exhibit towards others. Consider the example Steenbergen et al give of an inferior justification: in the speech of Conservative MP Jacqui Lait, she makes a demand for the requirement of receipts for people claiming childcare allowances, since in theory they could spend their allowance on washing machines. Steenbergen et al immediately misconstrues the argument as a claim that people would spend the money frivolously or are likely to (for which Lait provides no evidence) (Steenbergen et al 2003:32). One could argue that an argument genuinely engaging with Lait would challenge whether it obtained that people could spend the allowance on washing machines. Furthermore this whole act seems to re-orientate the discourse as if it were between the coders and the other participants. It also challenges the notion that coders are recording objective facts, since the reading seems to rely in part on the coders' interpretation. Consider another possibility: suppose Lait was suggesting that receipts be demanded, not because she thought it was likely that people would spend child care allowance frivolously, but rather as an attempt to pre-empt any accusation that recipients could abuse the policy, which would threaten public support for social welfare. Suppose the other participants were aware of this inference. Suppose Lait assumed participants were aware of her intentions so neither she, nor the participants felt she had not conveyed her concerns authentically. It is possible that the speech contributed to a good act of deliberative discourse, while the coders would render it insincere or an inferior inference because they did not recognize the true nature of what was being communicated. This implies that the coders may not have access to the inferences and subtleties that might exist between the participants of discourse. Their interpretation of respect and justification may not correspond with the general consensus of the participants (indeed it seems that coders, as outside observers, are necessarily in this position, even if their readings correspond). The DQI seems to have failed to measure deliberative quality accurately, since discourse ethics is concerned with participants' actual behaviour towards other participants and how this is perceived by other participants – not merely the subjective speculations of outside observers.

The example discussed illustrates a problem with the objectivity claimed in the DQI. Discourse ethics is interested in the intersubjective achievement of understanding and process of decision-making. However, since the coder does not have access to authenticity

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or intersubjective attitudes concerning, for example, judgements, inferences, and respect, it does not accurately measure these features. Instead the DQI offers a hypothetical judgement about what is, for example, a good justification, without appealing to the participants' effects. It is claimed that this judgement is based on objective content in speech. This would seem to engage in the monological process that Habermas rejects, and furthermore it would imply that "good justifications" or "respect" are matters of objective fact, which Habermas' discourse ethics suggests is inappropriate. What is more, the example discussed above suggests that this objectivity is not achieved, for the reading still relies on the interpretation of the coders. Thus it would seem that Steenbergen et al's intention for the DQI is in conflict with discourse ethics theory. It could be argued that a better alternative measure of discourse would involve interviewing the participants regarding their attitudes, since they would surely be the last court of appeal regarding how they felt. The DQI could be used for this, although, given the restrictive nature of the codes, this may not be desirable. However, this is clearly not Steenbergen et al's intention: it would not be objective, and different coders could produce different readings and be perfectly justified in doing so.

Implications of the DQI and Conclusions

Habermas' Critical Theory was developed with the intention of being applied to practical problems. This discussion reveals problems with Steenbergen et al's ambitions of producing an objective measure of deliberative politics based on discourse ethics; it suggests an application that attempts to provide an objective measure, but instead will tend to reduce, distort and misconceive discourse ethics. The DQI highlights how it is inappropriate to approach speech in discourse as an objectively observable phenomenon, since discourse also includes many subjective and intersubjective dimensions (such as the extent to which people feel respected within a debate, or are persuaded by a particular justification). These aspects would perhaps be better addressed by interviewing the participants themselves, rather than simply examining what was said. The problems faced by the DQI do not necessarily exclude the possibility of a meaningful application of Critical Theory to practical problems. Discourse ethics provides a persuasive account of what it is people seek when they seek greater fairness or democracy in ethical discussion. The theory may be used to consider actual acts of deliberation and political institutions, to interpret the extent to which fair deliberation is achieved, and to identify obstacles preventing more democratic decision-making. This discussion has indicated much material that is clearly relevant to Habermas' theory in this respect, for example the functioning of parliamentary debates, which involves representative democracy, adversarial politics and unequal distribution of participation opportunities.

In conclusion, Steenbergen et al's application of discourse ethics is problematic; the DQI distorts the ideals as it reduces them to observable phenomena, the measurement criteria are arbitrary, and it fails to measure discourse accurately between participants as an objective empirical study, or to access the relevant intersubjective and subjective features crucial to discourse ethics. This paper suggests that these problems are symptomatic of the enterprise of using discourse ethics to provide an objective measure in empirical research. However, this

paper maintains that, even if applications struggle to meet the demands of objective research, it is still possible that discourse ethics could be usefully and informatively applied to issues such as democracy or deliberative politics. It may be argued that it would be more desirable to open up the discourse quality of a discourse to discussion, rather than attempting to fix it by an objective measure (which this essay has shown to be inappropriate). Discourse ethics is concerned with the social world of norms, not the objective world.

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