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Facilitating Inclusion: Austrian Wisdom Councils as Democratic Innovation between Consensus and Diversity

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Abstract

Democratic innovations face the challenge of realizing deliberative democratic ideals in the context of structural inequality. Consensus decision making and expertise have been said to have exclusive effects on marginalized groups like women and ethnic and sexual minorities, which obstructs diversity. *Wisdom Councils* as practiced in Austria attempt to counter inequalities by including marginalized groups through the moderation technique *dynamic facilitation*. Exploratory participatory observations and interviews with a moderator and the participants of two Wisdom Councils in Austria provide a deeper understanding of the inclusive processes at work in Wisdom Councils facilitating a productive combination of consensus and diversity.

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Democratic innovations, as means of increasing citizens' direct participation in politics, draw on various theoretical sources (Smith, 2009). Among these sources, they are inspired by the concept of deliberative democracy as a reciprocal exchange of rational arguments among free and equal participants aiming at a consensus. Deliberative democracy, however, has been charged with bearing exclusionary tendencies. Consensus decision-making may disadvantage less vocal and less politically experienced participants. Social pressure to conform may bear harder on those with fewer social and economic resources and members of marginalized social groups suffering from a history of oppression, such as women and ethnic and sexual minorities. In her influential study, *Beyond Adversary Democracy*, Jane Mansbridge (1983) found that women tend to speak significantly less than men in public settings. These findings were affirmed in Christopher Karpowitz and Tali Mendelberg's (2014) recent study. Respect appears to be distributed unevenly along the lines of group identities. Iris Marion Young explains:

> The norms of deliberation privilege speech that is dispassionate and disembodied [… .] These differences of speech correlate with other differences of social privilege. The speech culture of white, middle-class men tends to be more controlled, without significant gesture and expression of emotion. The speech culture of women and racial minorities, on the other, tends to be more excited and embodied. (Young, 1996, p. 124)

The notion of consensus through deliberation derives from implicit assumptions of an objective truth. Through the exchange of rational arguments, the objectively best solution to political problems is supposed to be found. While expertise undisputedly contributes to deliberation, privileging this kind of knowledge over everyday experiences, personal perspectives, and intuition puts marginalized groups at a disadvantage: "Expertise inevitably generates exclusionary discourses and closed circles of deliberation, which become barriers to citizen participation" (Dahlgren, 2009, p. 78). This hinders valuable sources of knowledge from contributing to deliberation and, thus, inhibits diversity.

In response to this critique, *difference democrats* like Iris Marion Young and Jane Mansbridge have widened the scope of deliberation by stressing diversity in three regards: diversity of opinions, diversity of modes of expression and diversity of social identities. Young (2000) understands difference not as an obstacle to but as a resource for deliberation that facilitates mutual learning. Inclusion is realized by emphasizing the value of various modes of communication. Emotional expression and everyday experience can be contributed through *narratives*. Telling personal stories helps others understand particular perspectives. Lynn Sanders (1997) suggests as method of deliberation. Giving only one person the possibility to speak shifts the focus

from expression to listening. Deliberation happens in the minds of listeners while the speaker is free from the fear of being interrupted.

Democratic innovations are confronting the challenge of realizing the abstract ideas of deliberative democracy in the face of structural inequality (Fung, 2003; Papadopoulos & Warin, 2007; Smith, 2009). So how can the advantages of consensus be preserved while avoiding its oppressive tendencies? And how can expertise contribute to deliberation in a way that does not undermine everyday experiences? *Wisdom Councils*, a new participatory format practiced in Austria, provide possible solutions to these problems. In what follows, I describe their deliberative decision-making procedures and draw some conclusions in regard to diversity and consensus in deliberative democracy. Empirically, this article draws on two exploratory sessions of participatory observation, with attention to equality along the lines of gender identity among participants, an interview with a facilitator undertaken by the author and a series of interviews with the participants of the Wisdom Councils undertaken by the organizers.[1]

Wisdom Councils in theory

Wisdom Councils consist of 12 randomly selected citizens discussing political issues from a personal perspective over two days to generate a joint statement of recommendation for political decision-makers. In Vorarlberg, an Austrian state with fewer than 400,000 inhabitants, Wisdom Councils have been incorporated into the state constitution and can be called for by the parliament or the petition of 1,000 citizens. This participatory process was created by Jim Rough, who conceptualized Wisdom Councils as a tool for local governments to recognize the concerns of their constituency. Wisdom Councils are supposed to be organized periodically without an agenda to create a space for citizens to express concerns, requests and grievances.

In Wisdom Councils, the moderation method of *dynamic facilitation* is used. At the beginning of the process, the two moderators ask what topics the participants find especially important at the time of the session. After collecting the topics, the most important issue is determined and discussed over two days. All suggestions are collected on flip charts and structured according to four categories: problems, solutions, concerns, and information. Moderators explore participants' contributions in detail, asking repeatedly what exactly they mean, thus deepening the common understanding of the matter within the group. For example, statements regarding specific problems are not closed by asking for a solution right away. Rather, the problem is first

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[1] References to interviews with participants 1-5 in 2013 indicate interviews conducted by the organizers of the Wisdom Councils.

explored in more depth. This kind of moderation is reminiscent of group interviews. In comparison with interviews, however, there are no predetermined questions. The moderator moves from participant to participant and questions him or her in depth. This way, each person speaks for about 10 minutes without being interrupted by other participants listening to their elaborations. Throughout the process, the contents are collected by moderators, periodically summarized, and reflected back to the group. This way, new ideas and a common understanding emerge.

Rough (2002) identifies some theoretical considerations behind the format of Wisdom Councils. Wisdom Councils are not concerned with decision-making, he suggests, because the term *de-cide*, from the Latin *de-caedere* ("to cut off"), contains the notion of separation and, as such, ultimately represents a destructive approach. Instead, the aim is *choice-creating*: Instead of choosing the best of several existing options, thus discarding the others, a new solution emerges in a creative process that may or may not combine elements from the original options. While common collective decision-making processes often follow a clearly structured procedure with a rigid agenda, choice-creating remains as open as possible: "With choice-creating, the aim is not for people to stay on topic within some set of boundaries, but to follow group energy to a point where everyone looks at one another, knowing they want the same thing" (Rough, 2002, p. 83).

The resulting mode of communication differs from everyday communication practices. In capitalist societies, communication usually functions as the transmission of information; it is *transactional*. The fundamental principle of competition, which is at the core of capitalist societies, results in inflexibility of content and convictions. Political discussions tend to be competitive, with each participant trying to prove his or her point rather than being open to the opinions of others. By contrast, dynamic facilitation aims at *transformational* communication. Here the emotional quality of deliberation is central. The inclusive and welcoming atmosphere and the mode of communication of uninterrupted expression and listening creates possibilities for mutual learning and opinion change: "People are [open hearted], listening deeply to the feelings and perspectives of each person and they are being influenced in response" (Rough, 2002, p. 83).

Wisdom Councils in practice

On February 1-2, and March 1-2 and 15–16, 2013, three Wisdom Councils in the municipalities Mauthausen, Gusen, and Sankt Georgen, Austria, were held. At the latter two of these sessions, I conducted participant observations. In contrast to their theoretical construction, Wisdom Councils in Austria are not held periodically and without agendas, but they are used by local governments to find solutions to specific problems. The governments in the cases observed

organized Wisdom Councils to inform their decisions on how to deal with the architectural remnants of two concentration camps in Mauthausen and Gusen and a Nazi regime weapons factory in Sankt Georgen. These structures are being utilized as memorial sites, but additional uses are still to be decided. The region is marked by social tensions and a generational conflict. Many members of the older generation want to leave the past behind and live a "normal life," while many younger people have developed a critical response to past Nazi influence and want to continue to engage with it. Other conflicts have arisen from commemorative tourism, which generally proceeds peacefully but sometimes leads to aggressive behavior by tourists toward residents associated with the horrendous crimes of Nazism in the tourists' minds. In this context, citizens came together to discuss the region's problems and develop solutions. The Wisdom Councils were part of the project "Awareness Region, Mauthausen – Gusen – Sankt Georgen: A space for remembrance and learning," conducted by the Austrian Institute for Conflict Research.

The participant observations followed an exploratory approach, with attention to in/equality along the lines of gender identity among participants, the use of consensus, and the role of moderators. The composition of the two Wisdom Councils represented the demographic structure of the population of the rural towns well with regard to age, gender and professional background. While the first council of six women and six men constituted an even gender balance, in the second council this balance was slightly off with seven women and five men. In each council, one person representing an ethnic minority was present.

Several studies show that in public discursive settings, men tend to speak more often and longer than women. A classic example can be found in Jane Mansbridge's (1983) study of a town meeting in Selby, Vermont, where only 29% of contributions came from women, compared to 71% from men. More recently, Christopher Karpowitz and Tali Mendelberg (2014) found that in deliberative groups of five, men tend to speak significantly more than women. In the Wisdom Councils investigated here, these patterns were not replicated. In the first Wisdom Council, the speaking time of each gender was quite even with at 51.7% for male and 48.3% for female participants. In the second Wisdom Council, female speaking time (per capita) exceeded male speaking time with at 60% to 40%. This is in line with Karpowitz and Mendelbaum's finding that the more women are present, the longer they speak. Thus, according to this indicator, these patterns of inequality along the lines of gender identity were not replicated in the Wisdom Councils.

This stark contrast to other studies of gender equality in deliberative settings can be explained by the specific discursive setting of Wisdom Councils. My overall impressions, based both on the participant observations and the interviews, were that despite the controversial issue at hand, an open, tolerant,

and productive atmosphere was created. A key explanatory factor is participants' practice of rarely talking directly to each other; they mostly interacted via the moderators. Conflict—and thus a variety of opinions—is voiced but channelled by moderators. Martina Handler, one of the moderators of the Wisdom Councils, described her role:

> We guide with our physical presence. We move around in the room, and when I feel that something is happening between two participants, then I place myself between them. If I feel that a person is aggressive, then I go over to her. Or if a person says, "What you're saying is totally wrong!", I get between them and say, "Please, let's just listen to what this person has to say. You can go next." Thus, the aim is to protect the space, because for trust to grow, each individual needs to know, "I'm not going to be attacked here." And that has the effect of creating an atmosphere of trust, where everyone can say what's in his heart. (M. Handler, personal communication, August 22, 2014)

This clearly reflects Sanders' (1997) notion of testimony: one person shares her or his views and experiences with the group without fear of being interrupted, while the group listens. The moderators' concentrated attention and appreciation is mirrored by the group. Respectful and constructive conduct is quickly established within the group as a matter of course. Testimony-giving does not mean, however, that participants simply narrate their stories, oblivious to what has been said by others before. These testimonies are responses from personal perspectives and are shielded by the moderators. They pick up arguments of others, express consent or dissent, and propose alternative views. However discursive the nature of these statements are, and even if they directly address other participants, the speaker appears to converse with the moderator. So participants direct their responses to each other's statements to the moderator. The role of the moderators is also perceived and appreciated by participants: "I liked that we were all sitting in a circle and that we had two mediators who supported us in our learning process and discussion. I got a lot out of that personally, because, otherwise, where do you begin if there's no mediator?" (Participant 5, 2013) It was interesting to observe participants' friendly and personal conversations in the coffee breaks. This was the first time they spoke directly to each other. However, they had gotten to know each other, their personal concerns and political attitudes, quite well during the moderated sessions by listening to each other's testimonies.

The tolerant atmosphere allows for an openness toward marginalized social groups and peripheral views. "The way it was organized gave everyone space" (Participant 4, 2013). Inclusion in Wisdom Councils appears to be realized through the moderators' openness towards modes of communication besides rational arguments, such as narratives. For example, a central narrative of the

second Wisdom Council told of a tourist in Mauthausen, who spat in a resident's garden as an expression of his contempt for the Nazi crimes. This narrative clearly triggered strong emotions in all participants, resulting in numerous remarks revolving around this incident. The narrative did not express a rational argument, nor were participants asked to deduce an argument by the moderators. The deepening of the narrative and the emotional effects it had on participants represented the preliminary aim of the moderators, allowing for the generation of possible solutions later in the process.

By these means, the focus of the deliberative process is shifted from academic knowledge to personal everyday experience. One participant put it this way: "I can't say anything about other cities because I just don't know about them. But I can say something about my region. That's what made this a very interesting concept for me" (Participant 1, 2013). By entering the realm of personal everyday experience, participants connected to their emotions, affects and passions. Handler explained:

> Knowledge is not the main focus. […] That is why we deliberately do not invite any experts. Instead, we invite people who are affected within this community, who talk about their own personal experiences. "What does that trigger in me?" It's about my personal involvement, my feelings, my experiences. It's not about the better argument. Emotion and passion are the essential prerequisite for this kind of process; otherwise, it wouldn't work at all. […] It is essential to connect with the individual experiences. In other words, not: "Academic studies have shown that...", but rather, "I myself feel that way." And that has a completely different quality. […] For dynamic facilitation, you need passion, you need emotion, and also controversy and conflict. That brings in the energy, so that people get really intensely involved. (M. Handler, personal communication, August 22, 2014)

The central role of emotion appears to have had an inclusive effect on women, whose speaking style, according to Young (1996), is often characterised by affective expression. This allows for more diversity of perspectives, which are constitutive of the learning process in deliberative democracy:

> In my opinion, the highest possible diversity is an essential condition for a successful process. Because this way you get creativity in a group, and you enable mutual learning. And then new ideas emerge. That's the innovation aspect. You don't get that in homogeneous groups. (M. Handler, personal communication, August 22, 2014)

However, the question of how to deal with conformist effects of the consensus principle still remains. In the observed Wisdom Councils, some participants felt that consensus and diversity were equally ensured: "What was special about it for me was the combination of people, that we are actually quite different, but we were still able to come together to reach a consensus. I mean, despite the liveliness, the diversity, a community developed here" (Participant 2, 2013)."'I think the oldest in our group was about 80, but I don't know exactly, and the youngest was 15. So hearing the varying opinions was a great experience. And seeing how quickly the group grew together, and how well that worked with people who'd never met before!" (Participant 3, 2013)

The key to how Wisdom Councils successfully deal with both the positive potential and the negative tendencies of consensus lies in the interplay of an individual and a collective level built into the deliberative process. This results in a dialectical relationship between the individual level at which dissent and individuality remain, and a collective level at which consensus is produced:

> The process is about every individual presenting his or her view, whatever is important to *me*. By saying what is important to me, you will then see where the group has common ground, where a sort of *we* develops. [...] At this point, I, as a moderator, pose the question: "What would *your* solution be? Yours!" In this moment, I am always with the individual participant. That is an individual solution, but I can also feel to what extent the group supports it. This contributes to a further crystallization of the *we*. Here people consistently work on a solution, continuously specifying it. Thus, you always come from personal experience—this way you're connected to the passions of the people, to the feelings and to the individual realities—but in the process you enter into the *we*, time and again. By asking the question "What might the solution to *your* problem be?", they then consider together "What could *we as people* in the community do to address the problem?" (M. Handler, personal communication, August 22, 2014)

The productive use of consensus as the democratic ideal while simultaneously avoiding conformist tendencies thus lies in discursive modes built into the deliberative process, which allow individuals to participate in a "we" while maintaining their personal and dissenting views. Consensus emerges at the point where new insights into others' ways of thinking are enabled:

> I believe that this method, which grants each and every one a lot of space and which encourages everyone to say what is really in his or her heart, and to listen to what others have to say, has the effect of getting you in sync with each other, so that suddenly you understand things. You can sort of tune into each other, such that

> then the result becomes more or less obvious. (M. Handler, personal communication, August 22, 2014)

The moderation principle that gives attention to one person at a time, letting this individual freely express and elaborate on his or her thoughts as everybody else listens and ponders what is said, allows for the creation of new solutions. Telling stories, giving testimony, and listening facilitate inclusion in a *contingent* "we," while both belonging and maintaining independence.

Conclusion

The key to Wisdom Councils' partial success in overcoming exclusionary tendencies inherent to deliberation lies in the moderation method of dynamic facilitation. So far, academic attention to facilitation is rather scarce. However, it has been pointed out that successful moderation techniques might contribute to flattening internal hierarchies along the lines of social identities (gender, ethnicity, sexuality), resources (socio-economic status, education, rhetorical skills) and personal characteristics (charisma, confidence) (Mansbridge et al., 2010; Moore, 2012; Smith, 2012; Trénel, 2009). The question of which kind of moderation method to use proves decisive as "a non-interventionist, 'hands-off' style can lead to domination by more vocal and confident citizens; a more interventionist 'hands-on' approach that equalizes the opportunity for voice may be too domineering" (Smith, 2012, p. 100). Dynamic facilitation appears to find the right mix with the strong role of moderators who facilitate mutual respect without limiting content.

One apparent disadvantage of Wisdom Councils is the non-binding, advisory character of their results. While the study of democratic innovations emphasizes the importance of their political impact (Font & Smith, 2013; Geissel, 2012; Papadopoulos & Warin, 2007), suggestions of Wisdom Councils depend on the goodwill of local authorities for implementation. Moreover, outcomes tend to offer little specificity. This appears as a direct trade-off to the weak form of consensus. An overall idea of the group is formulated in a final statement, but in order not to suppress individual views or exclude certain ideas, this statement tends to be vague. Criticism also can be expressed regarding the mode of participant selection. Random selection has the advantage of creating a representative *mini public* by chance. Legitimacy, however, is compromised by self-selection. As participation is not mandatory, in the Wisdom Councils investigated here, about 90% of invited participants declined the invitation. As a result, more politically active and more educated citizens tend to participate (Smith, 2012). Moreover, the strong role of the moderators could be of concern. Skilled and sensitive facilitators are required, who steer the conversation in a just way, including weak and constraining dominating participants. Paradoxically, it is the central power

position of the moderators that potentially equalizes relations among participants.

Nevertheless, Wisdom Councils appear to be a useful instrument to introduce everyday knowledge into political decision-making processes, and thus "look beyond the public sphere itself, into the terrain of the private—or, expressed alternatively, into the experiential domain of everyday life" (Dahlgren, 2009, p. 75). These ideas and perspectives rooted in the social experience of those directly affected are, however, not a substitute for academic expertise. In a society founded on division of labor, the consultation of experts is an important resource for democratic decision-making. In the participatory planning process, of which the Wisdom Councils described above were a part, six additional focus groups consisting of academic and civil society experts were conducted. In the final report, both sources of knowledge were combined. What is key here is that the phases of accumulation of expert and everyday knowledge were separated. In many other participatory formats, participants first consult experts in plenary sessions or read specialist literature. If including everyday perspectives and 'real-life' social experience into the decision-making process is a vital goal of democratic innovations, the separation of these two phases is necessary for two reasons. First, plenary sessions with experts "can be particularly intimidating environments for the less confident" (Smith, 2012, p. 99), and might, thus, deter some from sharing their experiences. An expert is commonly perceived as an authority, which creates a hierarchy within the deliberative setting. Second, if participants are confronted with expert knowledge early in the deliberative process, their original ideas might be biased in the context of a discourse driven by objectivity, facts, and rationality.

Wisdom Councils are a promising attempt to bring everyday knowledge to the decision-making process. By navigating between diversity and consensus, they create an inclusive space, realizing the aspirations of difference democrats, at least to a certain extent. The tension between the democratic principles of consensus and diversity, however, remains unresolved and might not even need to be resolved, as it functions as a driving force for further democratic innovation.

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