

Pragmatic Deliberation

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1 Pragmatic Deliberation

“A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience” John Dewey.

A pragmatic approach to social deliberation involves seeking ‘reflective acceptance’ on the part of all participants in a collective decision.^{i,ii} This approach emphasises the importance of social intelligence in democracy, as well as the need for empirical learning in communities that produces real knowledge.ⁱⁱⁱ

According to a pragmatist proposal for evaluation criteria and collaborative research, deliberation features three important moments:

- the opening of the discussion,
- the development of the discussion,
- and the closing of the discussion.^{iv}

The quality of deliberation can be evaluated based on how well it meets certain criteria, such as the inclusion of diverse perspectives, the use of evidence and reasoning, and the ability to reach a shared understanding.

In the context of deliberative democracy, there is a dilemma between two models of pragmatism: Deweyan pragmatism and Rortyan pragmatism.^v Deweyan pragmatism emphasises the importance of inquiry and experimentation in democratic decision-making, while Rortyan pragmatism emphasises the importance of contingency and irony in democratic discourse. Both models have their strengths and weaknesses, and the choice between them depends on the specific context of the deliberation.^{vi}

2 Advocates of Pragmatism

Some of the main advocates and proponents of the pragmatic methodology include:

- **John Dewey:** Dewey is often considered the father of pragmatism and was a major advocate for the use of practical knowledge and empirical learning in social and political decision-making.^{vii}

- **Charles Sanders Peirce:** Peirce was another major figure in the development of pragmatism and emphasised the importance of inquiry and experimentation in the formation of knowledge.^{viii}
- **William James:** James was a philosopher and psychologist who applied pragmatism to issues in the humanities and social sciences.^{ix}
- **Richard Rorty:** Rorty was a philosopher who developed a neo-pragmatist approach that emphasised the importance of contingency and irony in democratic discourse.^x
- **Gert Biesta:** Biesta is a contemporary philosopher who has written extensively on the importance of pragmatism in education and social research.^{xi}

Overall, these thinkers and others have contributed to the development of pragmatism as a philosophical and methodological approach to social and political decision-making.^{xii}

2.1 Rortian Pragmatism

“The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not” Richard Rorty.

Richard Rorty developed a distinctive and controversial brand of pragmatism that expressed itself along two main axes. Here are some principles of Rortian pragmatism:

- **Beliefs are habits of action:** Rorty contends that to hold a belief simply means that one is inclined to act in certain ways.^{xiii}
- **Primacy of life over truth:** Action, survival, and the satisfaction of our needs are more basic than the notions of truth and knowledge.^{xiv}
- **Emphasis on actionable knowledge:** Pragmatism emphasises the importance of knowledge that can be put into action.^{xv}
- **Conversation is important:** Conversation is the most important concept for understanding the political and religious.^{xvi}
- **Demystifying human life:** Rorty's pragmatic aim was and continues to be the development of a liberal society where there is freedom from pain and humiliation and where open-mindedness is.
- **Theory as an aid to practice:** Pragmatism treats theory as an aid to practice, rather than practice being seen as defective theory.^{xvii}
- **Anti-metaphysical questions:** When the pragmatist applies these principles to the concept of truth, a set of anti-metaphysical questions immediately arise.^{xviii}

“Truth is what your contemporaries let you get away with” Richard Rorty.

It is important to note that Rorty's entitlement to the label "pragmatist" has been challenged by some prominent readers of the classical American pragmatists.

2.2 Deweyan Pragmatism

“Everything which bars freedom and fullness of communication sets up barriers that divide human beings into sets and cliques, into antagonistic sects and factions, and thereby undermines the democratic way of life” John Dewey

John Dewey's definition of pragmatism can be understood as a critique and reconstruction of philosophy within the larger ambit of a Darwinian worldview. He rejected the dualistic epistemology and metaphysics of modern philosophy in favour of a naturalistic approach that viewed knowledge as arising from an active adaptation of the human organism to its environment. Some key aspects of Dewey's pragmatism include:

- **Practical and related to daily life:** Dewey believed that educational philosophy should be practical and connected to political, social, economic, and educational problems of daily life.^{xix} In pragmatism, every thought or belief is subordinated to action, and intellect is subordinate to practical ends.^{xx}
- **Truth as usefulness:** Pragmatism teaches that what is useful and works in a practical situation is true, while what does not work is false.^{xxi} Truth is not fixed, eternal, absolute, and unchangeable, but rather changeable, purposive, and practical.
- **Rejection of absolutes and unchangeable truths:** Dewey rejected the idea of a world of absolutes and unchangeable truths. He believed that this world is subject to constant change and uncertainty, and knowledge enables humans to direct this change.
- **Integration of mind and action:** Knowing and doing are seen as one in pragmatism, with mind and action being inseparable. This integration is reflected in Dewey's focus on action in education, where children learn by doing.^{xxii}
- **Importance of experimental inquiry:** Dewey, like other pragmatists, emphasised the importance of experimental inquiry.^{xxiii} He viewed knowledge as resulting from the discernment of correlations between events or processes of change, and inquiry required an active engagement with the world.^{xxiv}

3 Pragmatism's Characteristics

Pragmatism differs from other approaches to social deliberation in several ways, including:

- **Emphasis on problem-solving:** Pragmatism sees social issues as problems that require practical solutions.^{xxv} This approach emphasises the importance of empirical learning and experimentation in communities that produces real knowledge.
- **Focus on community:** Pragmatism sees the ultimate arbiter of what is a problem, as the community. This approach emphasises the importance of social intelligence in democracy and the inclusion of diverse perspectives in deliberation.^{xxvi}
- **Open-ended reflexivity:** Pragmatism envisions reflexivity as open-ended processes of inquiry geared towards a broadening of the community of inquiry. This approach emphasises the importance of contingency and irony in democratic discourse.^{xxvii}
- **Rejection of universal principles:** Pragmatism in ethics rejects the idea that there is any universal ethical principle or universal value. This approach emphasises the importance of deliberation in determining appropriate actions in different circumstances.^{xxviii}
- **Methodological focus:** Pragmatism originated as a method for clarifying concepts and hypotheses and for identifying empty disputes.^{xxix} This approach emphasises the importance of inquiry and experimentation in democratic decision-making.^{xxx}

4 Pragmatism and Critical Theory

Pragmatism and critical theory differ in several ways when it comes to social deliberation:

Pragmatism:

- Emphasises problem-solving and practical solutions.^{xxxii}
- Focuses on the community and the inclusion of diverse perspectives in deliberation.^{xxxiii}
- Envisions reflexivity as open-ended processes of inquiry geared towards a broadening of the community of inquiry.^{xxxiii}
- Rejects the idea that there is any universal ethical principle or universal value.
- Emphasises the importance of inquiry and experimentation in democratic decision-making.

Critical theory:

- Emphasises the critique of power relations and social structures.^{xxxiv}
- Sees social issues as the result of systemic oppression and domination.^{xxxv}
- Presupposes dedicated empirical inquiry and methodology.
- Breaks with the Continental tradition that has denigrated pragmatism as an Anglo-Saxon philosophy subservient to technocratic capitalism.
- Sees deliberation as a means of challenging power relations and promoting social change.^{xxxvi}

Overall, while both pragmatism and critical theory are concerned with social issues and the role of deliberation in addressing them, they differ in their underlying assumptions and goals. Pragmatism

emphasises practical problem-solving and the importance of diverse perspectives, while critical theory emphasises the critique of power relations and the promotion of social change.

Critical theorists view the role of power in social deliberation differently from pragmatists. Here are some ways in which they differ:

Critical theorists:

- See social issues as the result of systemic oppression and domination.^{xxxvii}
- Believe that power relations are pervasive and shape all aspects of social life.^{xxxviii}
- See deliberation as a means of challenging power relations and promoting social change.
- Emphasize the critique of power relations and social structures.

Pragmatists:

- Emphasize problem-solving and practical solutions.
- Focus on the community and the inclusion of diverse perspectives in deliberation.^{xxxix}
- Envision reflexivity as open-ended processes of inquiry geared towards a broadening of the community of inquiry.^{xl}
- Reject the idea that there is any universal ethical principle or universal value.
- Emphasize the importance of inquiry and experimentation in democratic decision-making.^{xli}

Overall, critical theorists and pragmatists have different views on the role of power in social deliberation. Critical theorists see power relations as pervasive and seek to challenge them through deliberation, while pragmatists focus on problem-solving and practical solutions, and emphasize the importance of diverse perspectives and inquiry in democratic decision-making.

5 Advantages to Pragmatic Approaches

There are several advantages to a pragmatic approach to social deliberation, including:

- **Focus on problem-solving:** Pragmatism sees social issues as problems that require practical solutions.^{xlii} This approach emphasises the importance of empirical learning and experimentation in communities that produces real knowledge.^{xliii} By focusing on practical solutions, a pragmatic approach can lead to more effective and efficient decision-making.
- **Inclusion of diverse perspectives:** Pragmatism emphasises the importance of diverse perspectives in deliberation.^{xliiv} This approach recognizes that different people have different experiences and knowledge, and that including a variety of perspectives can lead to more informed and well-rounded decisions.

- **Open-ended reflexivity:** Pragmatism envisions reflexivity as open-ended processes of inquiry geared towards a broadening of the community of inquiry. This approach emphasises the importance of contingency and irony in democratic discourse.^{xlv} By encouraging open-ended inquiry, a pragmatic approach can lead to more nuanced and thoughtful decision-making.
- **Rejection of universal principles:** Pragmatism in ethics rejects the idea that there is any universal ethical principle or universal value.^{xlvi} This approach emphasises the importance of deliberation in determining appropriate actions in different circumstances. By rejecting universal principles, a pragmatic approach can lead to more context-specific and flexible decision-making.^{xlvii}

A pragmatic approach to social deliberation can lead to more effective, well-informed, and context-specific decision-making by focusing on problem-solving, including diverse perspectives, encouraging open-ended inquiry, and rejecting universal principles.

6 Pragmatism and Truth

Dewey's pragmatic theory of truth is centred around the idea that truth is not fixed, eternal, absolute, and unchangeable, but rather changeable, purposive, and practical.^{xlviii} Here are some key points about Dewey's approach to truth:

- **Truth as a goal of inquiry:** Dewey's pragmatic account of truth focuses on truth's function as a goal of inquiry.^{xlix} This means that truth is not something that exists independently of inquiry, but rather something that is sought through inquiry.
- **Truth as a product of controlled inquiry:** Dewey reserves the term "true" only for claims that are the product of controlled inquiry.^l This means that claims are neither true nor false until they have been subjected to inquiry.
- **Truth as a means to an end:** Dewey's pragmatic theory of truth emphasises the importance of truth as a means to an end. Truth is not an end in itself, but rather a means to the resolution of a problematic situation.^{li}
- **Truth as a tool for action:** Dewey believed that truth is a tool for action. Truth is not something that exists independently of human action, but rather something that is used to guide human action.
- **Truth as agreement:** Dewey believed that truth is a matter of agreement. Truth is not something that exists independently of human beings, but rather something that is agreed upon by human beings.^{lii}
- **Truth as a social construct:** Dewey's pragmatic theory of truth emphasises the social nature of truth. Truth is not something that exists independently of human society, but rather something that is constructed by human society.^{liii}

Dewey's pragmatic theory of truth emphasises the practical, purposive, and social nature of truth, and views truth as a means to an end rather than an end in itself.

7 Pragmatism and Social Deliberation

One example of a successful pragmatic approach to social deliberation is the use of social deliberation to shift resource allocation decisions by focusing on the fate of the least well-off.^{liv} This approach has been shown to be particularly effective when the group members share a frame of reference and incentives but disagree on some issue.^{lv} By focusing on the needs of the least well-off, social deliberation can lead to more equitable and just resource allocation decisions.

Another example is the use of representative deliberative processes for public decision-making.^{lvi} These processes involve bringing together a diverse group of citizens to deliberate on a specific issue and make recommendations to policymakers. The success of these processes depends on several factors, including effective public communication, equal participation, and the ability to weigh different options and trade-offs.^{lvii} By involving citizens in the decision-making process, representative deliberative processes can lead to more informed and legitimate decisions.

Overall, these examples demonstrate the potential of a pragmatic approach to social deliberation to lead to more equitable, informed, and legitimate decision-making.^{lviii}

Here are some key principles of social deliberation that a pragmatic approach would prioritize:

- **Practical knowledge:** A pragmatic approach to social deliberation emphasises the importance of practical knowledge in the "performative attitude" from the point of view of a competent speaker. This approach recognizes the importance of empirical learning and experimentation in communities that produces real knowledge.^{lix}
- **Inclusion of varied perspectives:** Pragmatism emphasises the importance of diverse perspectives in deliberation.^{lx} This approach recognizes that different people have different experiences and knowledge, and that including a variety of perspectives can lead to more informed and well-rounded decisions.^{lxi}
- **Open-ended reflexivity:** Pragmatism envisions reflexivity as open-ended processes of inquiry geared towards a broadening of the community of inquiry. This approach emphasises the importance of contingency and irony in democratic discourse. By encouraging open-ended inquiry, a pragmatic approach can lead to more nuanced and thoughtful decision-making.
- **Context-specific decision-making:** Pragmatism in ethics rejects the idea that there is any universal ethical principle or universal value.^{lxii} This approach emphasises the importance of deliberation in determining appropriate actions in different circumstances.^{lxiii} By rejecting universal principles, a pragmatic approach can lead to more context-specific and flexible decision-making.^{lxiv}

A pragmatic approach to social deliberation prioritizes practical knowledge, inclusion of diverse perspectives, open-ended reflexivity, and context-specific decision-making.

8 Pragmatic Deliberation Techniques

Here are some specific techniques that a pragmatic approach to social deliberation might use:

- **Empirical learning and experimentation:** A pragmatic approach emphasises the importance of practical knowledge and empirical learning.^{lxv} This approach might use techniques such as case studies, pilot projects, and simulations to test and refine potential solutions.
- **Inclusive participation:** A pragmatic approach prioritizes the inclusion of diverse perspectives in deliberation.^{lxvi} This approach might use techniques such as stakeholder analysis, public hearings, and citizen juries to ensure that a variety of voices are heard.
- **Open-ended inquiry:** A pragmatic approach envisions reflexivity as open-ended processes of inquiry geared towards a broadening of the community of inquiry.^{lxvii} This approach might use techniques such as dialogue circles, appreciative inquiry, and reflective practice to encourage open-ended inquiry and reflection.
- **Context-specific decision-making:** A pragmatic approach rejects the idea that there is any universal ethical principle or universal value.^{lxviii} This approach might use techniques such as cost-benefit analysis, risk assessment, and scenario planning to determine appropriate actions in different circumstances.

Collaborative problem-solving: A pragmatic approach emphasises the importance of problem-solving and practical solutions.^{lxix} This approach might use techniques such as design thinking, brainstorming, and consensus building to facilitate collaborative problem-solving.

Overall, a pragmatic approach to social deliberation might use techniques such as empirical learning and experimentation, inclusive participation, open-ended inquiry, context-specific decision-making, and collaborative problem-solving to achieve its goals.

Pragmatic approaches to social deliberation can be used as a technique for media discussion in several ways:

- **Encouraging inclusive participation:** Pragmatism emphasises the importance of diverse perspectives in deliberation.^{lxx} Media discussions can use this approach by ensuring that a variety of voices are heard, including those that are typically marginalized or underrepresented.
- **Focusing on problem-solving:** Pragmatism sees social issues as problems that require practical solutions.^{lxxi} Media discussions can use this approach by focusing on practical solutions to issues, rather than simply highlighting problems.

- **Using open-ended inquiry:** Pragmatism envisions reflexivity as open-ended processes of inquiry geared towards a broadening of the community of inquiry.^{lxxii} Media discussions can use this approach by encouraging open-ended inquiry and reflection, rather than simply presenting preconceived ideas.
- **Promoting context-specific decision-making:** Pragmatism rejects the idea that there is any universal ethical principle or universal value. Media discussions can use this approach by recognizing the importance of context-specific decision-making and avoiding simplistic or one-size-fits-all solutions.^{lxxiii}
- **Facilitating collaborative problem-solving:** Pragmatism emphasises the importance of problem-solving and practical solutions.^{lxxiv} Media discussions can use this approach by facilitating collaborative problem-solving among participants, rather than simply presenting competing viewpoints.^{lxxv}

“Democracy is a form of government only because it is a form of moral and spiritual association” John Dewey.

A pragmatic approach to social deliberation can be a useful technique for media discussion by encouraging inclusive participation, focusing on problem-solving, using open-ended inquiry, promoting context-specific decision-making, and facilitating collaborative problem-solving.

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