Conceptual Diversity in the Empirical Research of Discursive Communication

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The paper ‘Conceptual Diversity in the Empirical Research of Discursive Communication’ is part of a broader research project, i.e. *LearningDemoi*, where I try to explore the discursive dimension of political communication as it happens ‘spontaneously’ (i.e. without intervention on the part of the researcher) in the public sphere. Two objectives prompted me to write this paper:

1. First, I wanted to defend my research from the possible charge of ‘concept stretching’;
2. Secondly, with this paper I sought to clarify, from a conceptual perspective, what I was doing in my research, which means that I also had to clarify conceptually what other authors, from which I draw for my research, have done in their studies.

My argument is that, when it comes to analysing deliberation or, more broadly, the rational dimension of communication, there are
at least two research models that inform empirical research. They are the result of:

1. How the concept of discourse or deliberation is understood;
2. The methodological perspective adopted.

The *standard, political theory* approach sees deliberation as a regulative ideal with which to assess actual political communication and empirically identify cases of deliberation. Furthermore, it seeks to explore how different variables are regularly associated with one another. This is the model that is typical of research carried out under the heading ‘empirical turn’ in deliberative theory.

The *narrative, social theory* model, in contrast, sees discourse as a counterfactual ideal, and it pays greater attention to the pathways that connect different events and variables to each other in time. It is typical of studies carried out by political sociologists working from within a Habermasian framework.

Certainly, there are exceptions to this, i.e. to which studies should be placed in one model or the other, but broadly speaking this description is fair, I believe (and I try to show this in the paper).

Right now, we might be witnessing the emergence of a third model, inspired by the so-called ‘systemic turn’ in deliberative theory. Yet, I have not considered it in the paper mostly because it has not yet crystallised in any recognisable approach to empirical research.

Let me begin by considering the different understandings of the concept of ‘deliberation’ or ‘discourse’ by these two models. For most political theorists, deliberation is a regulative ideal, that is, “an ideal to which, all else equal, a practice should be judged as approaching more or less closely” (Mansbridge et al., 2010). Surely, there are different accounts of what this ideal should look like – Bächtiger and colleagues distinguish between type I and type
II accounts, for instance – and there is also disagreement over the reasons that justify the ideal of deliberation – that is, whether it should be based on epistemic considerations, on universal pragmatics, on the principle of political autonomy, and so forth. Yet, despite these differences, what is common to most accounts is that they seek to establish a normative standard, which is then used to measure the quality of communication or to identify cases of deliberation in contradistinction to other forms of communicative interaction such as pandering or bargaining. In the words of Jürg Steiner, for example, the concept of discourse provides a kind of ‘Weberian ideal type’ with which to assess ‘how far away a particular speech situation is from the ideal type’.

In stark contrast, the social theory reading of discourse conceives it ‘not [as] a normative model against which we judge the adequacy of existing arrangements’ (Eder, 2007). Rather, discourse is counterfactual idealisation that inevitably permeates communication and exerts a weak influence over it. In the terms of Nicole Deitelhoff and Harald Müller, discourse is not a variable but a constant in communication. Unlike political theorists, social theorists and political sociologists are not so much interested in assessing communication but in accounting for certain features of communication, and they do so on the basis of this weak influence of counterfactual idealisations.

This conceptual difference is relevant, for it leads to different views of what the empirical and observable manifestations of discourse are. The political theory model sticks to an image of deliberation that is narrower, yet empirically clearer and thus methodologically more convenient. From an empirical perspective, deliberation is what approximates the ideal of deliberation. The social theory model, however, acknowledges a broader range of phenomena as empirical manifestations of communicative rationality. ‘Islands of persuasion’ – that is, cases when
communication approximates the ideal of discourse – but also diffuse and long-term processes of opinion formation, argumentative self-entrapments, or the mere problematisation of a given state of affairs are regarded as empirical expressions of communicative rationality, that is, as partly the outcome of the counterfactual idealisations of discourse.

The political theory model and the social theory model of communicative rationality also differ as regards their methodological approaches. The standard, political theory model privileges a co-variational or variable-centred approach, which is interested in finding out the constant effects of independent variables over dependent ones, whereas the narrative, social theory model adopts a sequential or narrative approach, which pays much more attention to the order of events. Explanatory accounts are embedded in narratives that depict action as unfolding in time, with previous events and actions conditioning subsequent ones. Granted, co-variational and sequential approaches partly overlap, yet there are also visible differences in emphasis between them.

Surely, one might see some affinities between the two understandings of discourse introduced earlier and these methodological approaches – in particular, between the reading of discourse as a counterfactual idealisation, which grounds the expectation of learning processes, and the narrative approach. Yet, as I argue in the paper, there is no necessary theoretical relation between these understandings of discourse and these specific methodological approaches – it simply happens that they are usually used together without there being any intrinsic connection.

In sum, my argument is that there are at least two conceptual models that inform empirical research on communicative
rationality. They differ as regards the range of empirical phenomena that can be associated to the rational dimension of communication; as regards their normative impetus; and as regards the explanatory logics that they favour. Besides, this means that the usual criticism of concept stretching raised by political theorists against loose interpretations of deliberation is misplaced if directed against social theorists / political sociologists. It glosses over the conceptual differences that exist between these two models of discourse. From within the narrative, social theory model it simply does not make sense to speak of ‘concept stretching’ in the same way as political theorists.

Finally – how to conceive the relation between these two models of discourse? In this respect, I think the Habermas-Apel debate illustrates two relevant points. First, both models can be seen as perfectly compatible with each other. Indeed, Habermas and Apel share a similar understanding of discourse as a counterfactual idealisation, but they also believe that a normative standard can be gained from it. However, their disagreement as to how this normative standard can be derived from the counterfactual idealisation of discourse – more or less directly in the case of Apel, via the introduction of further considerations in the case of Habermas – illustrates that these are genuinely two different models; in other words, they are not two sides of the same coin, for it is less than obvious how these two understanding of discourse relate to each other.