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UNDERSTANDING, AGAIN

I recently agreed to speak with Angele Delevoye about understanding. Here is what I said to her and another set of comments on the topic, drawn from a May document .

I have been thinking about what to say to you on understanding.

1. Understanding is one of the most challenging concepts that exist for those researching mini-publics. There are a number of concepts and behaviors that fall in the traditional areas of communication, psychology and sociology and admit properly to objective measurement in the tradition of the social sciences. But understanding is the most philosophical of the concepts, relating to how well people are able to make sound decisions, and is very difficult to “measure”, short of simplistic factual questions on knowledge.
2. My views on this topic are extensive. My focus in the social science measurement has been on validity (does a protocol measure what it is supposed to?) rather than reliability. My training came from Paul Meehl, a psychologist who was one of the leaders in the 20th century on psychometrics. Attached below is a relevant article.
3. You may not want to deal with me, if you are eager to complete a thesis and do not wish to run into challenges from empiricists at Yale. This is because of my reliance on the epistemology of the later Wittgenstein, rather than the empiricism I learned from Meehl. Even so I am much more in the American empiricist tradition than someone like Habermas.
4. On the other hand, I am not all that radical. I worked for several years in the 1980s with Bob Dahl, someone I suspect is still admired at Yale. See my paper “In Search of the Competent Citizen” posted on Ned Crosby.org
5. Attached is one of the most recent things I have written on understanding. It shows that my goal is to create a method to deal with possible public policy criticisms, rather than a set of measurements to satisfy social scientists.
 1. Understanding. It is important to give the randomly selected microcosm of the public sufficient time and opportunity for them to conclude themselves that they have a good understanding of an issue. This can be done under the guiding notion that they are learning together with the support of the staff that has been carefully trained about the importance of minimizing staff bias.

What I propose is a pragmatic notion of when a mini-public has a sufficient understanding of a topic. After hearing testimony from three or four different points of view, the participants should be divided into as many groups and asked to summarize what they have heard.¹ They should be assigned to groups so as to insure that they are a mix of conservative and liberal view-points. They are asked only to summarize what they have heard, not to comment on the validity of the presentations or whether they are appealing to the values of the participants.

Once these summaries have been done, they should be sent to the presenters for comments. These, in turn, are reviewed by participants to see if they want to modify their summaries. If the presenters then can say that they believe they have been understood, this can stand as a sufficient indication that the participants are understanding the topic. If one or more presenters insist they have not been understood, then this will require further examination into what the presenters claim the participants do not understand. Perhaps more witnesses need to be called to give further background information and clarification of the topic.

Of course it is always possible for someone to claim that they have not been understood. Such claims can go on endlessly. But my experience with participants is that they have a good sense of when they are being manipulated. They are likely to conclude without too much work either that the topic is indeed so complex that laypeople cannot understand it, or that they understand well enough what is being said to them and they disagree with the presenters who insist they have not been understood.

This approach to “understanding” is based on what is sufficient to make a policy choice that is under consideration. It also is posited in light of how well mini-publics can do when compared to legislators. When legislators have paid close attention to the understanding of an issue that a mini-public achieved, they often comment on how they wished they had the time and carefully designed hearings to learn about issues in the way the mini-publics have done. Although there are always a few experts among policy makers, I believe that a majority of those in mini-publics who make a judgment on an issue have a better understanding than a majority of the legislators voting on the same issue.

It is obvious that understanding an issue is critical to the legitimacy of mini-publics. But to the best of my knowledge little has been done to explore this and attempt to establish any standards for what should be achieved. Those of us in the deliberative movement tend to be impressed by the level of understanding achieved and steer clear of the intellectual debates that may arise if such standards are proposed. Certainly this could become an academic's delight, with intricate papers written and intense arguments generated about what it means to “really” understand something.

¹ How many points of view should be presented to participants in a mini-public is amenable to empirical measurement, but should be done in light of the literature in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, especially James P. Kahan and C. Daniel Batson in 1975 regarding research in lab vs. real life settings.

Suffice it to say that my epistemology is based on some of the academics who fall into the camp of the later Wittgenstein. My favorite quote is from Michael Scriven:

There is no sense in which we could ever provide a complete justification of an explanation out of context; for a justification is a defense against some specific doubt or complaint, and there is an indefinite number of possible doubts. Michael Scriven, "Explanations, Predictions, and Laws" in H. Feigl and G. Maxwell Minn. Studies in the Philosophy of Science v3, 1962, p197

To me, this means that the level of understanding we should seek for a CJ depends on the purpose at hand. Certainly some CJs conducted for five days have achieved an impressive level of understanding. But my view now was that the level of understanding achieved was not sufficient for their policy recommendations to be really solid.

Work done by the Jefferson Center in 1993 is a good way to reflect on this. The budget CJ in January of that year was a very solid project on the federal budget. It led to the lovely op-ed by William Raspberry in the *Washington Post*. But in spite of the fine job they did, it was clear that spending half a day on a major issue like health care was grossly inadequate. It was enough time for the jurors to decide how to put their conclusions at the end of the half day into an overall picture of the budget. But I was well aware that they only skimmed the surface. Their level of understanding was sufficient for the demonstration project we conducted, but insufficient for the creation of sound public policy.

It was in the fall of 1993 that we ran the CJ on the Clinton health care plan. The week spent seemed to us to be sufficient for the jurors to have significant doubts about the Clinton health care plan that was being developed at that time. But it also was enough time for me to realize that even a week was not enough to develop a sound understanding regarding what should be done about health care. This led me in 2003 to write a nice piece for Carolyn Lukensmeyer, "What Health Care System Do Americans Want?". It devotes two pages to why the week spent on the Clinton health care plan was not nearly enough for the jurors to deal effectively with the "tragic choices" involved in making health care policy. The implication is that several weeks would be needed. Certainly a Citizens' Assembly with seven 3-day weekends could dig into this in a very effective way.

The one time we had the opportunity to ask the participants to review their understanding of an issue was in a small CJ conducted by the Jefferson Center in the 2012 May CJ on the complex topic of federal debt and deficit. There were only 12 jurors, but they divided into three groups, each charged with summarizing one of the three positions that had been presented to them by witnesses from the American Enterprise Institute, Demos and the Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget. They were carefully assigned to the small groups to insure that a mix of attitudes on the key issue were represented in each group. Their task was not to say if they like or agree with the issue assigned to them, but simply to summarize in their own words what they were told. After they completed their task (in 1 ½ hours?) their summaries were reviewed by the whole group of 12 and then sent to the

three advocates for comments. These were then returned with comments from the presenters. They made only a few suggested corrections to the summaries, virtually all of which were accepted by the participants. In this six-day CJ the Center was able to offer solid evidence that the participants understood the presentations made to them on a complex topic by witnesses from three different points of view.

It is these experiences that have led me to believe that if a mini-public is conducted on something as complex as the future of jobs in America, it should be done with a Citizens' Assembly that meets for five to seven 3-day weekends. Much more can be said about this, but at least this note is a start of the discussion.