

Sub-Stream Proposal for the 8th international conference in Interpretive Policy Analysis on 3rd-5th July 2013 at the University of Vienna

The role of reflexivity in conflicts and policymaking

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Reflexivity is a common reference point in modernization theory (Luhmann, Beck, Giddens, Sandywell), developmental psychology (Piaget, Kohlberg, Groeben), critical social theory (Bourdieu, Habermas, Jessop), philosophy of science (e.g. Bunge, Gouldner) and organizational learning (Argyris & Schön). In most of these approaches specific emphasis was on political issues of reflexivity. With Giddens, for instance, we see the role of reflexivity in the interplay between citizens and experts. However, in this concept the focus is either set on trust or mistrust in experts or on knowledge-dependence of decision making in general. Experts themselves – their strains in dealing with a series of dilemmatic situations and possibilities for reflexive action – are not discussed at all. While in the theory of reflexive modernization Beck and Giddens portrait reflexivity as a more or less “digital” alternative to fundamentalist reactions on contingency and dynamics in the modern world, we see very different forms and levels of reflexivity in social practices and attitudes as well as in cultures and institutions. For us, reflexivity is an important feature of pluralism, critical thinking, democratic governance and institutional change.

Precisely because in times of crisis groups of publics lost trust in the continuous diffusion and linear progress of enlightenment, now more than ever, the question arises, to which extend the relation between experts and publics is characterized by new forms fundamentalism or reflexivity. How can the confrontation of conflicting, sometimes paradox perspectives foster reflexivity and change rules within traditional models of government? Which meanings are given to them by the actors involved? And how to identify levels of reflexivity in political cultures and subjectivity? If reflexivity is not understood as a digital construct, we have to discuss how to conceptualize epistemological qualities of knowledge, practice and culture in conflicts between publics and experts; and how this might contribute to understanding self-reference, inertia or change in policymaking.

As a personal competence and epistemological style, reflexive perceiving and acting can be described (and then operationalized) e.g. as an ability to take up an observational perspective on one’s own action and perception; an awareness of perspectivity, of being situated inevitably; it comprises an attentiveness of unintended side effects of own and others activities, and/or a high readiness to accept ambiguity and alternative interpretations of social reality (e.g. skepticism concerning “one best way”). In policy settings, reflexivity could be identified in epistemological practices, forms of discourse, ways of knowledge absorption, interpretations of traditional democratic structures, rules and routines, and especially in forms of dealing with conflicts between publics and political experts. Following the classics of moral education like Socrates and Kohlberg, as well as recent research on moral development, reflexivity can also be conceptualized as democratic competence. As

such, it plays an important role in processes by which problems are defined and meanings are given.

Based on such issues and options the organizers invite papers concerning ...

- the conceptualization of reflexivity as moral judgmental (Kohlberg), moral-democratic (Lind) and discourse (Habermas) competence.
- epistemology and epistemic patterns in conflicts between publics and political actors.
- the interplay of individual potentials and institutional conditions in dealing with conflicts.
- empirical and conceptual studies of the development of reflexivity as a competence.
- the importance of reflexivity in conflicts between experts and publics and its role in developing democracy on organizational (e.g. NGOs), meso (team, leadership) and individual (perception, consciousness/awareness, agency) level.
- the development of (reflexive) expertise in critical confrontation with the contingent character of diverse publics.

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