



Social Learning, Natural Resource Management, and Participatory Activities: A reflection on construct development and testing



Rodela Romina ^{a,b,*}

^a Wageningen University and Research Centre, Laboratory of Geo-Information Science and Remote Sensing, Wageningen, Netherlands

^b University of Nova Gorica, Laboratory for Environmental Research, Vipavska 13, 5000 Nova Gorica, Slovenia

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 18 June 2013

Accepted 21 March 2014

Available online 26 April 2014

Keywords:

Social learning

Natural resource management

Participatory approaches

Deliberative democracy

Adult learning

Multidimensional constructs.

ABSTRACT

This analysis reflects on the use of multidimensional constructs for the study of social learning in natural resource management. Insight from deliberative democracy and adult learning literature are used to ground the identified four dimensions (the moral dimension the cognitive dimension, the relational dimension and trust). Then, a selection of empirical cases is surveyed with the aim to develop and understanding how well the empirical outcomes reported by these sit against the insights borrowed from the deliberative democracy and pedagogy literature. The paper concludes with some recommendations for future research.

© 2014 Royal Netherlands Society for Agricultural Sciences. Published by Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Recent scholarship in resource management is rich of empirical cases that, rather than predictability, emphasise adaptation (e.g., co-management, adaptive management, adaptive co-management). Central to these approaches is learning, seen to have an important role at different levels of involvement to include resource users, resource managers as well as policy-makers [1–3]. Of an interest is that the resource management literature that emphasises learning and adaptation is not limited to the investigation of one type of learning processes but is open to more. It borrows insights from pedagogy and adult learning in order to study learning process in relation to current environmental issues. A marked feature of that literature is the interest for participatory approaches and the opportunity these have to trigger a type of transformative change process that some have come to call social learning. Here it is important to mention that although more than one definition of social learning is available the literature generally uses it to refer at a “sustainability” type of transformative change occurring at different levels and, in this, social learning is framed as a normative goal [4–6]. Differently from other disciplines where social learning is used to refer at socially-situated learning processes (e.g., management studies, adult education, criminology) in the resource management literature the term is used to refer at

a type of outcomes and processes assumed to be in place when, with the support of participatory approaches, people/stakeholders meet in order to discuss, or take decisions, in relation to a natural resource, or an environmental issue. Therefore, while learning is a process that individuals experience within and outside participatory settings, in much of the resource management literature social learning is rather framed as a construct used to guide research and practice, and as such it is loaded with meanings researchers give to it. For instance it is used in the critique of reductionist and top-down approaches, or when placing expectations and value statements on what, and how, is to be achieved with participatory approaches.

The presence of more than one definition led to several operationalisations of social learning. An earlier analysis of current research undertaken by the author highlights the emergence of three perspectives, each with its own assumptions about the learning process and learning outcomes [7]. That analysis identified that a group of literature operationalises social learning as a change of internal-reflective processes participants to participatory activities experienced; a second group of literature operationalises the concept as a change of practices/way in how things are done; while a third group as a move of the social-ecological system on a more sustainable trajectory [7]. The research reported here builds on that study. More precisely, in focusing on the assumptions brought forward by the first group of literature, named individual-centric, it seeks to reflect further on the operational measures suggested by Webler and colleagues [8], i.e., the *moral dimension* and the *cognitive dimension*, later picked up by others and extended to include the *relational dimension* and *trust*. It is an aim of the present research

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: rominarodela@hotmail.com

to consider if, and how well, these four can perform as a multidimensional measure of social learning. Also, it is an aim to reflect on participation driven learning processes and the implications that arise for the participant and the society.

There are several scholarly streams within policy studies research that are relevant to this end. However, taking into account the assumptions and interests of contemporary environmental and resource management literature, where emphasis is placed on process rather than outcome, and on collaboration rather than competition [9], the literature on deliberative democracy can be useful in the study of the implications that arise from participatory approaches [10]. Having assumed that *social learning* is a multidimensional construct I account for insights from deliberative democracy and in the next Section consider the four dimensions mentioned above. In Section 2, I also consider insights from pedagogy literature which are used to conceptually deconstruct learning interactions within a participatory context. Then, after giving methodological detail in Section 3, I turn to a selection of empirical studies and in Section 4 try to understand how well the empirical outcomes reported in selected publications *sit against the insights borrowed* from the deliberative democracy and pedagogy literature. Section 5 concludes the paper with some recommendations for future research.

2. Theoretical Background

In this section I make an attempt to bring together insights from deliberative democracy, and pedagogy literature in order to explore the moral and cognitive implications that arise from participation, and consider how participation influences relations, trust, and *learning interactions*.

2.1. Deliberation as a form of communicative interaction

Research on natural management has an interest in participatory approaches that are processes in which recourse users, managers and other stakeholders gather so to discuss and/or take decisions in relation to resource management. While some of that research focuses on the outcomes of participation [10], other research focuses on the process itself [8,10]. The process dimension of a participatory activity is an aspect of interest to the social learning literature since much of that research assumes that in the course of a participatory activity, through repeated interaction, participants can learn, enhance knowledge and develop shared understanding. In their analysis Parkins and Mitchell [9] take interest in the *process* and demonstrate that the deliberative democracy theory, which emphasises process over outcomes, can help to challenge some of the established traditions in resource management, and in so doing can lead to new ways of conducting and evaluating participation.

The theory on deliberative democracy developed as a critique of decision-making based on the competition of interests [11,12]. It assumes that the individual is an ethical and moral agent able to collaborate with others and critically reflect on the issues at stake [13,14], and that “deliberation leads to better decisions than alternative procedures, since everyone gets to express their opinion on the matter and since different opinions are subject to open scrutiny, so that the better argument triumphs” [15:1]. The theory on deliberative democracy assumes that deliberation can better bridge the gap between the preferences, needs and concerns of citizens and the decisions made on their behalf by appointed representatives [13]. Decision-making based on deliberation can lead to outcomes that are fairer, and more legitimate as made during an exchange of arguments, which Gutmann and Thompson [14: 52-53] see to be ‘the capacity to seek fair terms of social cooperation for their

own sake’. In its classical conceptualisation deliberative democracy concentrates on the ideal conditions for reasoned discussion and it assumes that deliberation facilitates a convergence toward shared outcomes and a transformation of deliberators’ preferences (e.g., Habermas’s ideal speech situation). However, much of the early literature on deliberative democracy is prevalently theoretical and for this reason was subject to criticism. Yet, later this changed as scholars tried to move from the articulation of theoretical claims in the abstract to research that seeks to ground empirically the assumptions advanced [16]. Unlikely to the classical model, where systematic reason-giving is the ideal, recent literature chooses a »practical« model where deliberative forums (e.g. citizen juries, assemblies, consensus mapping) are used in relation to real-life issues. This perspective acknowledges that reason-giving is one type of communication that occurs in parallel to other e.g., rhetoric, storytelling, testimony and humour, but also it acknowledges that participants may not always be open-minded, willing to consider others’ arguments and adjust own positions in the light of a reasoned discussion [13,15].

The type of influence such forums have on participants is of interest to this research. Namely of an interest is what deliberative democracy literature has to say about the participants’ experience that some social learning literature has put forward as the *moral dimension* of civil virtues, the *cognitive dimension* of knowledge acquisition, the *relational dimension* and *trust* [7].

On this regard, theorists of democratic participation have argued that when people are engaged in a discussion they benefit in terms of improved **civic virtues**; that is the qualities and skills needed for the functioning of the public good [17]. The argument is that when participants to a deliberative forum have to justify their arguments they do so not by bringing forward “particular” interests but by appealing to normative principles that are acceptable to others e.g., common good, justice [12]. Thus, participants have to think and weight what would count as a good reason for the other participants since justifications, which refer to self-interest would not work out well in a context where the decisions to be taken will have an impact on the whole community [15:71–72]. However, as discussed by Elstub [16] while the first generation of theorists as is Rawls and Habermas focus on the ideal conditions for rational debate and assume people will act rationally and reasonably, recent literature moves away from the rationalist position to acknowledge the complexity of modern society and the role moral sentiments i.e., judgments over right and wrong, have in such contexts. In their discussion of this aspect Goodin and Niemeyer [17: 629] bring forward the role of emotions and affirm that “empathetic extensions are crucial for such forums” since these allow participants to make sense of one another claims over the course of discussions. Their position is aligned with the emerging »practical« model that recognises how deliberation might not always unfold along the ideal of a “reasoned discussion” but is a forum where people bring their moods and temperaments, and use testimony and humour to advance their arguments. To this end of an interest is the study of Doheny and O’Neill [18] where they make a case for the transformative potential of deliberative forums. They look at Habermans’ ideas about moral learning and explore the assumption that at the end of deliberation participants are equipped »with new tools with which to evaluate the normative dimension of social issues.« [18:646]. They provide empirical evidence about participants to a deliberative forum moving along stages where have become more reflexive, have developed the capacity to take up differing points of view and presented arguments for the consideration of other participants [18: 633].

Theorists of democratic participation have argued that as participants, in the course of an activity, come across new information about the issue at stake they can link it to past experience and knowledge, and use it in formulating claims to defend their

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/4501271>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/4501271>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)