

Envisioning Deliberation with a Cultural Theory Lens

By Teshanee Williams

Creating opportunities for the public to deliberate and provide input into the regulation of emerging technologies, such as gene editing, is essential for expanding the ideas and beliefs that guide decision making ¹. The challenges involved with designing broad, public deliberation have been explored by many, including virtual or physical preference, quality ², and group size³. These studies have contributed to improving the process and evaluation of deliberations. However, individuals participating in public deliberation (i.e., the public) are subject to bounded rationality, and so their input is guided by their cultural norms, values, and rules⁴. To better utilize the knowledge presented within public deliberations and expand ideas incorporated into decision making, institutions must consider *how* the public makes sense of complex policy issues. Therefore, it is inadequate to assume that merely creating additional opportunities to engage in public deliberation would produce the information needed to inform decision making and identify a broad range of societal values. In as much, this essay discusses how we can envision public deliberation that creates distinct public participation venues according to well-established worldviews described by Cultural Theory (CT).

The essay first begins with a brief discussion to show how and why cultural theory complements the public deliberation process. Next, it defines and describes cultural theory and the four worldviews. It concludes with a discussion that introduces a

framework that can be used as a guide for designing public deliberation with a cultural theory lens. Specifically, for highly debated issues such as those related to nature.

Why Cultural Theory?

During public deliberation multiple perspectives are introduced but not all are given precedence. Research shows that the perceptions which resonate with those in decision making roles are more likely to shape the outcome of a public deliberation process ⁵. These studies found that agencies were more likely to be influenced by groups that had the ability to craft narratives describing risks and potential economic benefits that were similar to their own narratives ⁶. However, the public deliberation process and more importantly, the outcome of the process, should create room for perspectives introduced by all stakeholders involved. Therefore, when designing public deliberation, it is essential to utilize a framework that has the ability to neutralize power differences.

In addition, incorporating a cultural theory lens is beneficial because it provides a foundation for designing “good” public deliberation. This is because it incorporates a framework that is based on patterns of social relations, perceptions, and preferences that are consistent over time and circumstances ⁷. Furthermore, CT research has consistently confirmed a relationship between CT perspectives and attitudes toward nature across a diverse range of policy contexts⁸.

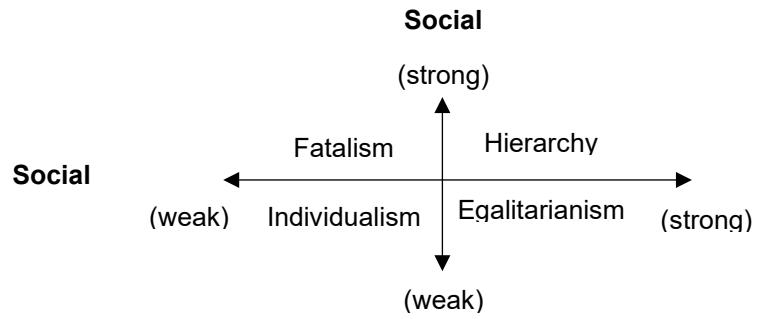
What Is Cultural Theory?

Cultural theory is a well-established tool for understanding cultural conflict ⁹. The earliest conceptualization of cultural theory originated in sociology by Emile Durkheim. It was further developed by anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966) to understand cultural

diversity. Douglas' (1978; 1982) research expanded the foundation of the theory by using the grid and group conceptualization to explain how humans relate to others and the world: grid (corresponding to social regulation) and group (corresponding to social integration)¹⁰. Individuals that ascribe to 'high grid' social regulation are guided by rules and authority, as opposed to 'low grid'. Meanwhile, individuals that ascribe to 'high group' social integration exhibit social relational patterns that are typical of strong group membership; these patterns are weaker in 'low group' (see Figure 1). The grid and group dimensions provide the framework for the four worldviews (Fatalism, Hierarchy, Individualism, Egalitarianism) that have been used to understand how individuals communicate and justify social relations.

The following section describes each worldview in terms of the combination of social regulation and social integration that produce relational patterns¹¹.

- *Egalitarianism (E)* advocates for weak social regulation and strong participation structures. It is defined by strong beliefs about equality and mutualistic social relations. Human decisions concerning nature involve caution to avoid negative consequences. Decisions about policy should be based on a collective decision-making process.
- *Hierarchy (H)* prescribes strong social regulation boundaries with strong rules about social integration. It is defined by rules that govern roles based on knowledge and authority. Decisions concerning nature should only be based on the perspectives of skilled experts and those in authority. Skilled experts are designated to communicate the voices of stakeholders.
- *Individualism (I)* is constructed by weak social regulation and weak group integration. It is defined by autonomy and utility maximizing principles. Decisions concerning nature and risk believe that advancements in science are primary.
- *Fatalism (F)* prescribes social relations based on strong boundary regulation and weak social regulation. It defines social relations as imposing because groups require conformity. Perspectives about nature are based on the belief that altering nature will create negative consequences that are not avoidable¹².

Figure 1. The Dimensions of Cultural Theory

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Overtime, researchers have compiled these social relations differently and have even proposed additional perspectives ¹³. Despite the differing descriptions and compilations, one of the foundational claims of CT is that these conflicting ways of “organizing, perceiving, and justifying social relations are the building blocks of social life” ¹⁴. Therefore, the antagonistic perspectives that create conflict within the public deliberation process can be used to inform decision making. Each perspective introduces a perceptual lens that offers more information based on the lived experience from that point of view.

Researchers have long sought to identify an approach that aggregates these conflicting perspectives across different policy issues ¹⁵. For example, Hood (2000) uses the cultural theory framework to prescribe approaches for how to design and organize public management operations based on the perspectives of the four worldviews. These studies fortify the implicit assumption that each worldview holds both strengths and weaknesses and contribute to scaling up the decision-making process and thereby, increasing the representativeness beyond the individual.

Ney & Verweij, proposed a design for how best to structure deliberative processes with each CT social relational perspective in mind¹⁶. The research was an expansion of work done by ¹⁷. Ney and Verweij posited that a deliberative process should needed to include the following: (i) the purpose of the deliberative process, (ii) the process for selecting participants, (iii) the issue to being discussed, (iv) the mode of communication and interaction, (v) the time length and frequency of the deliberation, (vi) the motivations and preferences of each participant, (vii) the level of empowerment, and (viii) the extent to which those involved in the deliberative process monitor previous policy decisions. They tested this proposed design for CT analysis of social relations on different forms of public deliberations and found that the outcome was often dependent on the type of issue being discussed. However, utilizing cultural theory to design and evaluate a public deliberation process is promising because it scales up the level of public representation by injecting, what sociologist consider, historical ways of viewing the world. Considering the propositions posited by Ney and Verweij (2014), Hood (2000), and Farina et al., 2014, this approach is offered as a tool for designing a public deliberation platform that accounts for a broad range of societal values by leveraging the principles for organizing according to cultural theory.

To design a public deliberation process that scales up representation agencies would need to incorporate multiple formats that address the preferences of the four worldviews. This approach differs from the others as the focus is less on the potential behavior of each archetype and more on the preference, learning style, and reaction to the process. The following section describes the public deliberation process for each worldview in mind. Additional details are discussed in table 1 below.

- The individualist - Public deliberations designed for the individualists should be based on a design that outlines the tradeoffs. The individualists seek to discover and communicate competitive options. Selection and recruitment are considered to be completely voluntary. Individualists thrive off of efficiency and desire limited deliberation. Instead, they prefer input options that involve some form of direct reporting.
- The egalitarian - Public deliberation designed for the egalitarian would ensure that as many members of the community could participate and have an opportunity to present ideas, questions and issues. This would require agencies to initiate deliberate outreach to ensure that traditionally underrepresented groups receive notice of the comment period. Notices would need to be structured in a way that emphasizes the need for input from those that could be affected by the final outcome. Egalitarians have a preference for small group discussions that promote equal participation. Therefore, they will consider the process successful if the process is deliberative by acknowledging and addressing the concerns presented in situated knowledge.
- The hierarchical - Public deliberations designed with hierarchs in mind should have a formal structure, especially in regard to time. Hierarchs believe that stakeholder judgements are unreliable because the policy problems are too complex for lay persons. Information should come from authorities and experts from the respective field. These experts should be involved in selecting stakeholders that are knowledgeable enough to provide input.
- The fatalist - Public deliberations designed with fatalist in mind should ensure that members are randomly selected. The goal is to inform the process of errs or ill-fated outcomes. Information should be structured to emphasize the need for input on decisions that affect those who cannot escape them.

Table 1. Designing Public Deliberation with a Cultural Theory Lens

	<i>Individualism</i>	<i>Egalitarianism</i>	<i>Hierarchy</i>	<i>Fatalism</i>
Goal for engaging in public deliberation	To discover and communicate preferences.	To reach a consensus based on collective ideas	To receive information and advice from relevant authorities	To inform the process of errs or ill-fated outcomes
Selection and recruitment of participants	Voluntary self-selection	Notices should target groups that are traditionally underrepresented stakeholders	Authorities and experts designate and invite knowledgeable stakeholders to represent the community	Random selection
Knowledge acquisition	Invite stakeholders to contribute ideas. Provide them with different views on the problem and its solution. Outline the tradeoffs.	Offer information in a way that emphasizes the need for input from those that could be affected by the final outcome.	Information should come from experts. Briefing materials should be offered.	Information should be structured to emphasize the need for input on decisions that affect those who cannot escape them
Duration and frequency	Efficiency is key	Multiple opportunities to engage	Structured time format	Duration has no consequence
Format	Opinion polls & direct responses	Small virtual group discussions, Forums	Expert panels, advisory board presentations, Forums	Any
Main contribution	To identify the benefit of alternatives	To generate a sense of community	To emphasize the need for structure and steering	To emphasize the public good
Perceptive evaluative measures	Level of negotiation and competition	Opportunities to deliberate, reflect, and confer with others.	Level of synthesis of expert and preferred stakeholders' views	Identification of potential errs that may occur

Adapted from: Ney and Verweij, "Exploring the Contributions of Cultural Theory for Improving Public Deliberation about Complex Policy Problems"; Hood, *The Art of the State*.

In conclusion, this approach to designing public deliberation with a CT lens provides a guideline for developing distinct public participation venues based on an individual's worldview. The goal of this approach is not to aggregate the results of all four perspectives. Instead, the goal is to structure a deliberation process that leverages the strengths and weaknesses of each social relation. Hood (2000) posited that the "situated knowledge" offered by each of the four worldviews can be reconciled to inform decision making because each perspective introduces a perceptual lens based on the lived experience from that point of view. Each of the four worldviews are important to the process of deliberation because of the unique contributions. They each have very specific goals for engaging in a public deliberation process. All offer different approaches for intentionally increasing the number of people involved in the process such that it meets the basic requirement of including others not normally involved in public participation.

Some may point out that such seemingly complex approaches to public deliberation are not possible because of the administrative inefficiency that they impose on agencies. However, there are short surveys that can be taken by group participants prior to a public deliberation event. The true administrative burden is related to organizing multiple platforms for public deliberation to include as many of the public as possible. However, that is an unavoidable cost of incorporating public input into decision making for emerging technologies.

In summary, the cultural theory framework complements the public deliberation process. Incorporating this insight would increase the accountability and transparency in the process by providing decision makers with a method for understanding *how* the

public makes sense of complex policy issues and for classifying a broad range of societal values that can be used to inform the decision-making process. Therefore, decision makers should consider this complementary approach to improve the public deliberation efforts in place that may be limited by only focusing on increasing opportunities for public deliberation.

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⁴ Simmons, "Using Cultural Theory to Navigate the Policy Process."

⁵ Eckerd, "Risk Management and Risk Avoidance in Agency Decision Making"; Naughton et al., "Understanding Commenter Influence during Agency Rule Development"; Nelson and Yackee, "Lobbying Coalitions and Government Policy Change: An Analysis of Federal Agency Rulemaking"; Yackee, "Sweet-Talking the Fourth Branch"; Mendelson and Rulemaking, "Torrents of E-Mail, 79 Geo."

⁶ Bevan and Rasmussen, "When Does Government Listen to the Public?"

⁷ Ney and Verweij, “Exploring the Contributions of Cultural Theory for Improving Public Deliberation about Complex Policy Problems”; Dryzek and Niemeyer, “Discursive Representation.”

⁸ Ellis and Thompson, *Culture Matters*; Thompson, “Cultural Theory, Climate Change and Clumsiness”; Swedlow, “Advancing Policy Theory with Cultural Theory.”

⁹ Douglas, “Culture as Explanation.”

¹⁰ Douglas and Wildavsky, “How Can We Know the Risks We Face?”

¹¹ Hood, *The Art of the State*; Thompson, “Cultural Theory, Climate Change and Clumsiness.”

¹² Hood, *Doing Public Management the Fatalist Way?*

¹³ Johnson and Swedlow, “Cultural Theory’s Contributions to Risk Analysis.”

¹⁴ Ney and Verweij, “Exploring the Contributions of Cultural Theory for Improving Public Deliberation about Complex Policy Problems,” 624.

¹⁵ Ney and Thompson, “Cultural Discourses in the Global Climate Change Debate”; Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age*; Simmons, “Improvement and Public Service Relationships.”

¹⁶ Ney & Verweij (2014)

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