2 A methodology for studying democracy and power in group meetings

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2.1 The challenge for research

A glance at the inner life of social movements opens a wide field of phenomena. Activists gather in a weekly meeting, organizers plan a campaign against an imminent war, group members spend an evening in a pub – all of these events are part of the routine of social movements. To narrow down this vast number of interactions, we have to make choices according to our research interest. Thus, our aim to explore the practice of democracy and power in contemporary social movements requires answers to important methodological questions: which arenas are considered central to understanding the setting of democracy and power? What are the precipitating moments in which these aspects of social organization come into play? What kind of data should be gathered, and which method makes them accessible? Which steps have to be taken to compare the manifestation of democracy and power across different groups and countries? These questions will be tackled in this chapter, which serves as a basis for understanding the methodological framework that is used in the empirically oriented contributions to this volume (with the exception of Chapter 8).

Social movements in general are complex entities to be described, in structural terms, as mobilized ‘networks of networks’ rather than genuine organizations (Neidhardt 1985; Diani and McAdam 2003). Moreover, they are enmeshed, multilayered networks that, in the case of the global justice movements (GJMs), span from the local to the global level. One could thus observe manifestations of power, as well as attempts to control and reduce them, in literally all pockets of these movements, be they the weekly session of a small and intimate local group, the anti-summit demonstration in which various groups compete for media attention, or a huge gathering such as the World Social Forum, which may attract more than 150,000 people.

Our first decision was to concentrate on face-to-face meetings in which activists present political views, make claims, analyse problems, exchange

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information, carry out and solve conflicts, and take explicit or implicit decisions. It is in these meetings that different positions are negotiated and struggles over power are fought in a discursive way. However, during the assembly of a global justice group, these struggles are unlikely to be visible from start to finish. Because we assumed that controversies would be central incidents in which power is acted out, we focused our analysis on these specific situations in face-to-face meetings (see also Haug 2010).

If we consider the meetings of groups and networks active in the GJM as an important site for observing the emergence of power, we are confronted with the methodological question of how to gather relevant data. Because the debates taking place in face-to-face meetings are transient events, there is a need to record these instances somehow. Only some social movement groups produce minutes of their meetings, and — as in interviews with activists — the record is arguably biased by the involvement of the minute-taker (or interviewee). For our purpose, it makes sense to get in closer touch with the interactions under study and to collect the required information on the spot. As a form of gathering data ‘in which the researcher observes and to some degree participates in the action being studied, as the action is happening’ (Lichterman 2002: 120), participant observation is the preferable method. Participant observers can use all of their senses and register behaviour that is not written down in documents or recorded on video- or audiotape. This is particularly important as we assume that an analysis of internal communication has to include both a non-verbal component and the knowledge of a particular ‘group style’ (Elia soph and Lichterman 2003: 737). Early tests in our project have shown that the interpretation of interactions is highly dependent on the observer’s familiarity with internal habits and latent conflicts. While our primary method of data collection was participant observation, we also used formal and informal interviews and consulted documents of the groups we studied.

As our research was conducted in the framework of a European project, we had the opportunity to broaden our perspective in a comparative approach. With researchers located in six countries, we examined the history and structure of the GJM’s national branches (della Porta 2007), as well as the visions and practices of democracy based on documents of central groups and organizations (della Porta 2009a) and on a survey at the European Social Forum (della Porta 2009b). In this context, a comparative approach to studying face-to-face interaction in global justice groups suggested itself.

The idea of comparative participant observation, however, seems to be contradictory. While participant observation is connected to the immersion of the researcher in the field, providing him or her with an intimate knowledge of the social processes in question, comparison is associated with general categories and a relationship that is rather detached from the object under study. This tension characterizes our approach. We had to formalize much of the participant observation to make it comparable and accessible for other researchers, who also used data from sessions in which they had not participated themselves. For this purpose, we developed three research instruments that included a coding scheme for controversial situations. At the same time, we needed to leave room for the knowledge acquired through participation in group processes. Thus, the research presented in this book cannot easily be assigned to a ‘qualitative’ or ‘quantitative’ strand of social science. Perhaps more than in other quantitative studies, the data presented here go back to an insightful interpretation of observed processes.

The hybridity of our approach is continued with regard to logic, as it is neither deductive nor inductive. Rather than testing a given theoretical framework of power and democracy, we chose an exploratory approach. We developed theoretically informed categories that guided our access to the field, but we used them in a flexible way to grasp different aspects and different styles of interaction in the observed meetings.

2.2 Our starting point and practical restrictions

Global justice groups and network meetings take place by the hundreds, every day, and all over the globe. Even an armada of researchers would be too small to cover what actually occurs in all these meetings in so many places. Limited resources have forced us to be selective in various ways.

First, we concentrated on GJM groups in six European countries: France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Switzerland and the UK. (In addition, though not using the same method, we studied transnational meetings of GJM.) We definitely wanted to include the large European countries, and those in which GJM had already existed for a few years. In addition, the selection of countries was influenced by pragmatic reasons such as pre-existing links among a group of similar-minded students of social movements, in combination with the availability of a research grant from the European Commission.

Second, we concentrated on locally based movement groups in areas in which the researchers live. This allowed us to minimize the logistical and practical hurdles to studying the groups. Yet, in three out of the twelve cases (Board of Attac France, No Vox and the Italian Water Campaign), these were not local groups in the strict sense, but rather bodies of nationwide organizations or alliances meeting in the city in which a researcher happened to live.
Third, we selected only two groups per country, again due to scarce resources while facing a time-consuming process of observation. As mentioned in Chapter 1, we aimed at selecting two groups per country that differed significantly in their degrees of ideological homogeneity. Ideally, we wanted to study a homogeneous and a heterogeneous group per country. By a heterogeneous group, we mean a group composed of members or representatives of different and ideologically divergent other groups, assuming that this type of group is marked by more intense controversies, thus posing a larger challenge with regard to discussion and decision-making. This theoretically guided pairing of groups was not feasible in all countries since, at the same time, we also had to take into account the pragmatic criteria mentioned above.

Fourth, we studied the groups not through their entire existence, but during a shorter period ranging from a few months to almost two years in 'real' time. This variation in the period of observation was due to the availability of researchers but also, in part, to the frequency of group meetings. Table 2.1 provides an overview of the meetings we studied.

Not all groups that were eventually included in the research fulfilled the selection criteria seamlessly. The distinction between homogeneous and heterogeneous groups turned out to be particularly blurry. On the local level, some heterogeneous networks which met on a regular basis evolved into groups in their own right, while maintaining the ideal of diversity. Four of the selected groups are part of the Attac network that was founded in France in 1998 with the idea of promoting the Tobin tax (a tax on financial transactions). They then expanded this focus on financial markets to a comprehensive critique of neoliberal globalization. Two of the groups are social forums transferring the model of the World Social Forum (WSF) to the local and regional levels. The first WSF was organized in Porto Alegre (Brazil) in 2001, bringing together diverse critics of neoliberalism to discuss alternatives for a globalization from below. The remaining groups are two local environmental initiatives that are part of a larger organizational framework (Ecologistas en Acción and Thanet Friends of the Earth), two national networks for the advancement of excluded groups (No Vox) and for the privatization of water supply (Water Campaign), a consumerist student group (Conscious Consumers) and a local network of solidarity groups (Córdoba Solidaria).

Given all of the selection processes and practical restrictions mentioned, we are far from expecting results that are representative for the GJM's as a whole during the given period of observation, let alone earlier or later phases of these movements. We simply do not know to what extent the groups and countries studied are 'typical' for the overall population of groups. However, the risk of having analysed only outlier cases is reduced.
by our selection of groups that (a) can be perceived as belonging to the core rather than to the margins of the GJM, with the exception of a local British student group (Conscious Consumers), (b) were different in their composition (homogeneous groups vs heterogeneous groups, e.g. composed of representatives of different local groups) and (c) were located in different countries.

In spite of all practical limitations, to our knowledge this is the most ambitious effort to study in a comparative perspective the actual internal practices of social movement groups with regard to their patterns of power and internal democracy, and their ways of handling conflicts and taking decisions. We consider the research presented in this volume a first step in building a better understanding of the internal processes of social movements, which have long been eclipsed by a dominant perspective that viewed movements as collective actors rather than as spaces within which interaction occurs. Beyond the question of whether or not our results are interesting or even surprising to others, we claim to make a leap forward on methodological grounds in having developed research instruments that are applicable not only in the realm of social movements but also to any kind of meeting.

### 2.3 Conceptual basis and research instruments

To answer the central questions laid out in Chapter 1, we developed a set of methodological tools based on a basic conceptual framework that allows for the variety of approaches represented in this volume. For example, while we shared a common concern for the determinants of democratic forms of controversial discussion, we included a range of variables that allowed for different conceptualizations of deliberation and other types of controversial communication. In Chapter 3, for example, Dieter Rucht uses the dimensions 'symmetry/asymmetry' and 'type of power' to define a basic concept of deliberation as well as three other types of communication. Marco Giugni and Alessandro Nai, in Chapter 7, construct an additive index which includes six of our variables. In between these approaches lie Christoph Haug and Simon Teune (2008), who add 'competitiveness' to Rucht's model as a third dimension.

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1 These are the type of power used in the discussion: deliberation (hard, mixed, soft), the degree of reciprocity of the discussion (low, medium, high), the degree of symmetry of the discussion (asymmetric, mixed, symmetric), the competitiveness among participants in the discussion (competitive, mixed, co-operative), the atmosphere or emotional charge of the discussion (tense, mixed, relaxed) and the degree of incivility among participants in the discussion (frequent, some, none).
and hence distinguish eight types of controversial communication, including deliberation. All of these conceptualizations consider deliberation as a form of communication in the narrow sense (rather than a comprehensive ideal of democratic participation) and therefore do not look at who participates in this communication and who might be excluded. Participation, in other words, is treated as a separate variable and, in Chapter 4, Clare Saunders and Christopher Rootes take a closer look at the various participation variables that we included in our dataset.

How did we arrive at this dataset, which constitutes the basis of almost all the chapters in this volume? To explain this, we will first describe the methodological challenges of comparative participant observation and then present the four layers of the dataset and the corresponding tools we used to collect the data for each layer (group, session, agenda item and controversy).

2.3.1 Comparative participant observation

Participant observation, as used in anthropology, is a qualitative method in which data collection and analysis continuously influence each other, allowing the individual to adapt his or her methodology depending on the necessities of the field. However, our aim is to compare the observations from researchers in six countries. With an adaptable design, this will be hard to achieve, since the circular process of data analysis and observation is likely to result in different categories depending on the specifics of the group observed, the observing researcher and perhaps the cultural specifics of the country. While we do not deny that a comparison of such more or less isolated case studies can be instructive, we wanted to make comparisons at a lower level of abstraction. Our interest lies in concrete controversial situations and the ways in which these are handled by the activists. The challenge was, therefore, to record (potentially) relevant aspects of these controversies in such a way as to allow researchers from the different country teams to use not only their own records, but also the data provided by their colleagues. Since even in cultural anthropology – a long-standing domain of participant observation – comparative designs are ‘largely neglected and thus underconceptualized both theoretically and methodologically’ (Kaschuba 2003: 341, our translation), we made our own attempt.

The method of participant observation aims to decode the culturally defined meaning of social interaction (Bray 2008: 301). The extensive existing body of literature on the general strengths and weaknesses of participant observation is not presented and discussed here (for the use of participant observation in the study of social movements, see especially Lichterman 2002; on ethnography, see Shukaitis and Graeber 2007, and Salman and Assies 2007). What was important for us was to contextualize the observed controversies. While in ‘ordinary’ participant observation this contextualization takes place mainly implicitly in the head of the (single) researcher, we had to find a way to make this contextual knowledge, which the participant observer acquired during his or her time in the field, available to the other research teams – at least to some degree. The challenge was hence to find a degree of standardization of the data that would, on the one hand, allow each researcher to follow a rather open and exploratory approach when analysing the data. On the other hand, data collection needed to ensure reliability, without blurring significant differences. This task may look like ‘squaring the circle’, but the studies in this volume illustrate its merits. The limits of the approach will be discussed below.

The basic and thinly knitted theoretical framework that guided the construction of our methodological tool for comparative participant observation was provided by theories of deliberation and deliberative democracy (see Chapter 1) and a more specific interest in how deliberation as well as other forms of communication are actually played out at the micro-level of face-to-face interaction in real-world settings. While the body of literature on empirical approaches to deliberation has been steadily growing in recent years (e.g. Steiner, Bächiger and Spörndli 2004; Trénèl 2004; Bächtiger and Steiner 2005; Janssen and Kies 2005), we did not find a comprehensive approach suitable to the challenges described above. While some of the coding categories resulted from our experiences in a first round of test observations, others were inspired by the extant literature, which helped us to identify some theoretically relevant categories (see also Haug and Teune 2008: 11). The methodologies used in this body of literature were, however, not applicable to our study, mainly because extant studies are almost exclusively concerned with either online deliberation or deliberation in strongly formalized (e.g. parliaments) or controlled settings (‘focus groups’), and not with the kind of informal settings we encountered in social movements. In contrast to these studies, we were not able to rely on full transcripts or audio/video recordings of the meetings. Hans-Joachim Fietkau and Matthias Trénèl’s (2002) method of in vivo coding for conferences and roundtables probably comes closest to our approach, but while their focus was on individual speaking turns, our aim was to code group behaviour, which we believe does not amount to a mere aggregate of individual behaviour.

The task of the participant observer was hence to grasp the situation as a whole rather than focusing on isolated speech acts of individual
participants. To do so, the participant observer needs no supernatural skills; it is the capacity of every ordinary participant to sense what is going on and how the whole situation changes in certain moments, to understand the overall constellation of the debate without necessarily fully understanding the details of each single contribution. For example, when it came to identifying distinct thematic episodes in the course of the session, we found that transitions from one episode to the next could be achieved in a virtually infinite number of ways; but, nevertheless, participants generally agree in the perception that a new phase of the meeting has begun.

2.3.2 Controversies and their context

In accordance with our aim to put into context the modes of communication in controversies, we developed three methodological tools for the participant observer to document his or her observations: the group portrait, the session report and the controversy protocol. The degree of standardization of these instruments increases successively. At the most general level, we aimed to reconstruct the history and structure of each of the observed groups. Second, we wanted to get an account of the setting, course and content of each observed session. The session report also included details about each thematic episode (or agenda item). Information about the group in general, the specific session and the issue at stake represent the background and context for the controversies, our most specific unit of analysis. Controversies may or may not lead to decisions. In addition, decisions may occur without any controversy in the context of an episode. This means that the dataset also allows for the identification of decisions as a dependent variable (see, for example, Chapter 7). In a more formal language, the first three levels of observation (group, session, episode) can be understood as independent variables to explain modes (e.g. deliberation) and outcomes (e.g. decisions) of controversies as our dependent variable.

Note that the three instruments (group portrait, session report, controversy protocol) produce four layers of data (group structure, session structure, characteristics of episodes, and characteristics of controversies). In what follows, we present the four data layers rather than the three instruments.

2.3.2.1 Group structure Knowing the group's ideology, history, social composition and strategic preferences is a prerequisite for understanding the controversies that are observed and classified in a more formalized manner. Knowledge of long-standing personal or ideological conflicts, for instance, might be necessary to understand the meaning of a controversy or the significance of a topic to the group. The purpose of the portrait is to convey basic knowledge about the group that one or two observers have accumulated to the other researchers, who should then be able to better understand group processes as they are recorded in the protocols during a session. Ebbs and flows in the size of membership, the composition of groups, and specific roles within the group are some of the features that can be known based on documents and interviews with long-standing group members, and as a side effect of participant observation of group sessions. Information on shared ideas about democracy in the group is of particular relevance for the study of deliberation, as one key concern of this volume. The group’s vision of internal democracy and probably also of democracy at large helps us to understand why the group chooses specific routines and styles of discussion.

To orient the researchers about what kind of information was required for a group portrait, we provided a structured list of items that should be covered. Main categories, for each of which more specific items were named, included, for example, the group’s history, the explicit role of deliberation and participation as a group’s aim, visions of democracy in the group, group structures, and action repertoires (see Appendix A). The final group portraits were presented as a report of eight to fifteen pages per group.

2.3.2.2 General characteristics of group sessions Reports on the sessions of global justice groups allow for analysing the structure and course of communication, both for each individual meeting and across a series of meetings. We can identify many aspects that reveal or mirror power structures and accordingly shape discourse practices by looking at the way in which group meetings are arranged. The seating order, the division of roles among participants, the distribution and length of speech acts, and the general atmosphere are important to contextualizing and better understanding the controversies that are at the centre of our interest. Is somebody chairing or facilitating a session? Who is it? Who dominates the spatial setting (for instance, are participants facing each other or the session chair)? Is participation roughly equally distributed beyond conflictual situations? The answers to these questions lead us to identify particular structures and styles used by a group to manage its meetings and perform certain tasks.

To get this information, the observer's data about every group session are recorded in a session report. This report is more structured in comparison with the group portrait. While some of the information consists of brief elements of text, other pieces of information are quantified and/or
formalized as codes (see Appendix B). Information is entered in an open-ended form sheet, which essentially allows for tracing the content and sequence of agenda items and the ways in which these items were dealt with. In a chronological manner, the session report records the structure of all communication during a group’s meeting, regardless of whether or not it is controversial. The data were later transferred to an SPSS matrix to facilitate analysis of the standardized variables.

Beyond keeping track of the sequence of a meeting and the particularities of individual agenda items, the session report is designed to record observations that are specific for the session. In a non-standardized form, the report can reveal differences between meetings that might be a sign of particular circumstances or a general shift in the group’s behaviour and/or composition. In addition, the usual venue of the meeting or the seating order may have changed. If so, it is important to note why this happened, who decided and how these changes affected the discourse during the meeting. Beyond such extraordinary changes, there are also questions related to the organization and division of labour: who played which formal role during the session? Who prepared the meeting? Who was the facilitator and who took the minutes? In addition, the participant observer takes note of the general atmosphere during the meeting, the presence of new members and their integration into the group, and any other particularity that she or he deems important.

2.3.2.3 Thematic episodes Meetings are usually divided into several episodes dealing with different issues. For example, a group starts a meeting with an evaluation of a demonstration in which they took part; then they discuss recent developments in the thematic field in which they work or inform each other about on-going activities, before deciding what to do next. For each episode of the meeting (defined as an agenda item), we record its topic, duration and dominant form of interaction, a rough measure for participation, and decisions, if any.

Measuring the duration of agenda items allows for reconstructing the time management of a group, including the aspect of whether time is spent on matters of principle or rather on organizational details. The assumption behind this is that time constraints are likely to shape the emergence and course of a controversy. For instance, an issue might remain undisputed when it is addressed briefly under conditions of time shortage, while it may yield conflict when more time is available. However, the reverse may also be true, when participants press for a decision in spite of time shortage. In such situations, conflict may arise about whether a decision should be taken or the issue postponed.

Apart from the duration of an agenda item and a possible shortage of time, the content of a discussion, its impact on the group itself or the group’s environment, and the constellation of interests are described briefly. Thus, we can put a controversy into the thematic context to which it relates. In that way, we learn which issues are prone to evoking latent conflict or bringing inequalities within the group to the surface. Disagreements, we assume, usually arise from different values and beliefs, from different concepts about the organization of the group and/or preferred forms of political intervention which, of course, are not independent from the endorsed values and aims. A group that completely agrees on the critique of a certain policy in one session may nevertheless exhibit diverging views on the appropriate forms of action in the following session. Both agreement and controversy are noted in the session reports.

As indicated above, agenda items are connected to different forms of communication. These are noted in the session report in a standardized coding. An input statement or other form of sharing information with group members is in many cases a prerequisite for a discussion or a controversy. Likewise, phases of brainstorming in which ideas are collected would be likely to occur in an early phase of addressing an issue. By contrast, go-rounds, during which every group member is asked for his or her position on a specific issue, are initiated either with regard to a potential decision or as a means to stimulate participation of all attendees when the discussion has been dominated by a few speakers.

Apart from the forms of communication, participation is one of the central concepts that we apply in analysing group meetings. The proportion of participants who made at least one statement is measured at the level of both agenda items and controversy. This information can be contrasted with the total number of attendees, which is also registered in the session report. In the context of GJMs, the inclusion of all participants of a meeting is generally considered as an essential of democratic decision-making. Both the quality and the legitimacy of a decision are dependent on the participation of the constituency. Especially for groups that emphasize the bottom-up approach to politics, participation in group sessions tells us about the difference between ideal and reality. Accordingly, actual patterns of participation are part of the session report. Recording participation for each agenda item allows us to identify issues that stimulate broad participation and others that activate only a small part of the group in the debate. Such differences in participation will also tell us more about the context of controversies. First, we will know whether participation in a

\[ \text{In this chapter, we use italics for emphasis and for discussion of variables that can be found in the three research instruments (see Appendices A–C).} \]
controversy is high or low compared to the rest of the session. Second, we can find out about the structure and dynamics of participation. A controversy might increase or decrease participation during the course of the session. Meetings are also the locus to make decisions. Not all decisions are preceded by a controversy, and not all controversies end with a decision. For non-controversial decisions, both the content and the method of decision-making (decision mode) are coded at the level of the agenda item in which the decision occurred. When looking at the content of the decisions, we might identify issues that are particularly contentious in group meetings.

2.3.2.4 Controversies. A controversy goes beyond mere disagreement. While a disagreement exists when B contradicts A and may consist of just one word, a controversy, according to our definition, only starts if A (or someone else) then contradicts B. Hence a controversy requires at least these three steps (although not necessarily in direct sequence). In our research tool, we captured controversies through three sets of variables. One describes the immediate situation in which the controversy takes place (another context level if you will); the second captures its outcome; and the third describes the controversy itself. While the codebook (see Appendix C) gives a description of each variable, we will focus in the next section on those that figure prominently in the following chapters of this volume, namely power and symmetry.

The basis for coding a controversy along these dimensions is the controversy as a whole. This requires the participant observer to grasp a kind of average across a number of speaking turns, which differ with respect to power, symmetry and so forth. We are aware that this kind of approximation is problematic because it may be a crude simplification of the dynamics that controversies often display. But we did not see an alternative because, as we found in various pilot exercises, coding on the basis of short sentences or single speech acts turned out to be impossible in real time. While such refined coding would be possible on the basis of tape-recorded discourse, we did not want to be dependent on such recordings — not only because it was unlikely that all groups would agree

5 Subject of controversy, type of controversy (reference point), duration of controversy, participation (total active, total female, female active), line-up of conflict situations, origins of conflicts, general atmosphere, time pressure, type of moderation, and involvement of the moderator.

6 Outcome (type of decision taken) and mode of decision.

7 Type of power, sources of power, competitiveness, asymmetry among speakers, recency, degree of incivility, 'focussedness' of the discussion, and decision-orientation.

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to being recorded (especially for several sessions), but also because coding on the basis of audio recordings more than doubles the time necessary for data collection since it implies going through the whole session again. Hence the observer had to estimate an average or a tendency across all speaking turns within a controversy. As a general rule, the intensity of single speaking turns can be neglected as long as they do not significantly influence the rest of the debate. For example, if someone makes a very angry and disrespectful intervention but the others ignore this and continue with their discussion in a calm way, then we note that some asymmetric behaviour was present but not prevailing. In ambiguous situations, the participant observer uses as an orientation the group hegemonic definition of the situation. In other words, the perspective of the observed actors themselves has to be taken into consideration.

The need for simplification is also reflected in the measurement of our dimensions of controversies on a four-point scale. Applying a more refined measure would have pretended a degree of accuracy that is not possible without using electronic recordings of the discussions as a basis of the coding.

2.3.3 Central aspects of controversies

Essential aspects of dimensions of a controversy include, first, the generalized attitude with which the interlocutors relate to each other. In their ways of communicating, they may treat each other as equal or unequal. Accordingly, we classify these relationships broadly as being either symmetric or asymmetric. Second, we try to identify the kind of power on which they rely in their communication. In this regard, we distinguish soft power based on arguments, evocation of experiences, or the use of rhetoric devices from hard power based on the threat and/or actual use of negative sanctions (for clarifications, see below). In a nutshell, the 'currency' of soft power is words, while the ultimate currency of hard power is action that, when applied, is expected to negatively affect the other side in a conflict. As a rule, however, such an action is not performed in the controversy but evolved in an implicit or explicit way.

2.3.3.1 Soft power versus hard power. What kind of resources do speakers use in order to make participants agree (or at least not disagree)? As said before, we assume that some sort of power is always involved when a
dependencies rather than on publicly proclaimed beliefs and norms. In the case of material resources or working time, which speakers can offer or threaten to withdraw, it is easy to recognize when hard power is used. But specific knowledge, which may be important to the group, can also serve as a resource an individual can grant or refuse. Finally, categorical reference to personal authority or proclaimed expert status is another form of hard power, that is, when authority is presented as an unspecified 'reason' (why something is true or good) rather than offering substantive arguments. Even though in theory this authority might be able to explain in more detail why his or her argument is valid, in the concrete situation the other participants simply have to believe it. Another form of hard power can be exerted based on a specifically assigned role (for example, as a session chair or a delegate with a free mandate) to make procedural and sometimes even substantial decisions. A general indicator that helps the participant observer to determine the existence of hard power in a controversy is whether the speakers as persons (or their resources) tend to be more relevant than what they actually say.

Furthermore, the existence and degree of hard power used in the process of a controversy should be inferred neither from the outcome of the debate nor from the mode of decision. Even though a decision might be finally taken on the basis of hard power (e.g. majority vote), hard power could have been absent in the preceding process of discussion. The coding of hard power is not based on whether it ultimately reaches its goal but only on whether it is actually mobilized or threatened.

2.3.3.2 Symmetry versus asymmetry The equality of speakers is stressed throughout the literature as essential for a deliberative debate. However, the notion of equality can be defined in very different ways: (a) in the sense of equal opportunities to speak (which does not necessarily imply equal actual participation), (b) relatively even distribution of speech acts and

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7 Several scholars have criticized the rationalistic bias of the concept of discourse, stressing that other forms of speech such as testimony or narratives are also legitimate and frequently used in group discussions (e.g. Young 2001; Ryb 2006).
8 For an interpretation, see McCarthy 1980: 351.
9 The accumulated knowledge of the observer about power relations within a group is part of the group portrait and will be taken into consideration in the process of data analysis.
10 One of the main challenges in measuring the power dimension is to distinguish between power structures within the group and the actualization of these strategies in a specific situation. For example, it matters if an expert is invited to a meeting to speak as an expert and discuss with participants, or if the same expert sits in the audience and (some) participants do not know about his/her status as an expert. In the former case, the expert status is publicly actualized (or even created) in that very situation and therefore must be considered when coding a controversial discussion in which this expert takes part. In the latter case, the expert status remains irrelevant for the coding as long as it is not actualized in the situation, for example by the expert himself mentioning that he/she has been working for quite a long time on this subject. This limitation of the observer's perspective on the evidence available in a given situation is necessary in order to ensure reliable coding on the level of controversies.
11 The exit of 'ordinary' participants from the discussion will not usually affect the discussion in the same way, but threatening to go is nevertheless a use of hard power. It becomes very effective when each participant is granted the right to veto any decision, as we have seen in some social movement groups. But more commonly the power of non-expert participants lies within their collective organization, enabling representatives to speak for them and using the threat of exit to exert power in the discussion. Here, the hard power of a speaker representing others results from the dependence of the opponent on those represented and their (collective) exit option.
12 This can be a personal goal as well as the common goal of the group or to mediate between factions or to facilitate the discussion.
speaking time or (c) a practice of mutual listening and respect. In addition to having a separate quantitative measure for actual participation in controversies in terms of speaking turns (and speaking time), we are interested in the relations that speakers constitute between themselves and others as they speak. To avoid the various and sometimes contradictory associations evoked by the term 'equality', we prefer to speak of 'symmetric relations', in the sense that other participants are recognized and treated as equal discussants in a specific discursive interaction. In asymmetric relations, certain speakers, in the very act of speaking and responding, treat other speakers as inferior.

One – rather obvious – way of expressing an asymmetric relation can be shouting at others, attacking them on personal grounds or not reacting to their questions, demands or arguments. But asymmetry does not exist only when a speaker flimsy offends some or even all of the others. One has also to take into account more subtle forms of asymmetry, for example, when a speaker treats others explicitly as less or more knowledgeable with regard to other matters but not in the matter at stake. Even though asymmetry is a generally valued characteristic of deliberation, we should acknowledge that asymmetric relations can be at least accepted (if not valued) in certain contexts or situations, for example, in the relationship between teachers and students.

In order to trace the differences in symmetry in various controversial discussions, we need to look not only for indications of asymmetric relations, but also for behaviour geared to diminish such differences. Both asymmetric and symmetric relations can be actively created through discursive practices. For example, a first step towards symmetry is taken when, before entering a debate, someone provides basic information about the issue and perhaps a summary of previous discussions so that all participants have the same background knowledge. On the other side, when such 'levelling' of knowledge does not take place before or during the controversy, less-informed speakers are likely to be treated as inferior. Additional behaviours displaying symmetry are the acceptance of different styles of speech, or openness to completely different approaches to the issue.

13 In the theoretical discussion, Habermas – to name just one of the most prominent advocates of deliberative democracy – supposes that equal communicative rights are counterfactually assumed in the very act of arguing and thus 'part of the intuitive knowledge of how to argue' (Habermas 2005: 385). At the same time, he states that 'abstract units invite an empirical analysis of how informal yet focused deliberations deviate from the model of rational discourse' (ibid.: 384).

14 This is why we treat participation as a separate variable which can both influence the type of discourse (e.g. a discussion with a high number of active participants might be less deliberative than in a small group) and be influenced by it (e.g. a discussion with prevailing asymmetric relations might discourage participants from becoming actively engaged).

2.4 Strengths and weaknesses of our approach

In our research, participant observation did not mean merely attending the meeting and taking notes after the group session. Rather, as explained above, we developed a set of three research tools of which two – the session report and the controversy protocol – required the researcher during the observation to categorize certain phenomena according to a largely standardized tool. Responding to these requirements, the researchers produced the session report and the controversy protocol(s) which, on the level of aggregated data, could be used for quantitative analysis. It has to be emphasized, however, that this quantification often rests on qualitative judgements, such as classifying the group atmosphere during a controversy as either relaxed or tense. In any case, and regarding many other aspects to be observed, participant observation is primarily a qualitative research instrument that allows for producing 'thick descriptions' (Geertz 1973) and documenting concrete examples to illustrate a more general point that emerges from the data (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

While observation of group communication provides the researcher with a constant flow of data, presence in group meetings and in informal gatherings after the meeting also allows him or her to have casual conversations with group members. These chats can be an important source of information to better understand what is actually going on in the group, for example, to learn more about the background and history of conflicts within the group, or to become aware of hidden agendas and personal animosities.

Taken together, participant observation and formal and informal interviews offer a number of advantageous points that, as for any research method, also have a downside. Let us start with the strengths of our approach.

First, we think it is a major advance to engage in participant observation in crossnational perspective based on the same methodological tools. To our knowledge, this has not been done thus far in the area of social movement studies.

Second, we profit from our multifaceted methodology consisting of different and mutually complementary levels and instruments of analysis. For example, when a tough confrontation between two group members

15 We had originally planned to discuss preliminary results with the observed groups and include the groups' feedback in the final analysis. However, this was not done in any systematic way, but only informally in two cases. We suggest that this aspect of the research process needs to be taken more seriously in the future, as it may not only significantly enhance the findings but may also make them useful for the subjects studied (Reason and Bradbury 2008).
over a seemingly political question arises, the researcher may wonder whether the heat of the debate stems only from different political stances. While sitting with other group members in a pub after the session, the researcher could ask his/her neighbour whether this conflict had also occurred in the past and whether it is also an expression of repeated personal conflicts. In addition, to mention another example, the comprehensive group portrait is not necessarily based on general impressions by the researcher but, to some extent, can also be controlled on the basis of the quantitative data he/she has delivered on specific agenda items and controversies. This exemplifies the potential strengths of combining qualitative and quantitative approaches.

Third, we did not develop these research tools ex ante, applying them without further modifications. Rather, based on a preliminary version, we tested the applicability of these tools in real settings. Based on these experiences, the structure of the controversy protocol had to be simplified in some respects because one observer has very limited capacities to grasp and document a multidimensional group process in real time. In other respects, the instruments were made more specific and fine-grained. In general, we tried to find the right balance between a holistic perception of phases of group interaction (e.g. was an issue discussed in a more competitive or more co-operative style?) and a detailed and specific coding of manifest entities (e.g. number of participants, duration and subject of agenda items).

Fourth, some of the researchers of the various country teams also came together in a methodological workshop in December 2006 to discuss all instruments in much detail, reaching a common understanding of various categories and adopting necessary changes. It was fruitful to compare the different experiences and to become aware of different (country-specific?) communication cultures that, in part, would have been missed if all of the work had been done in one country. In the end, we can say that our instruments were also, though not solely, the result of our early fieldwork and the joint reflection about it. Of course, they can and should be improved in the future. To facilitate this, we make these tools available to anyone who is interested.

On the other hand, we should also note the problems and limits of our approach which, in part, lay in the very nature of this kind of research but, in other ways, also have to do with our own limitations.

First, we should emphasize the limits of a case study approach with only two groups per country. As already stated, due to the inclusion of six countries, we had the chance to include much variation, but we still cannot be sure whether or not our cases are typical. Therefore, if we reiterate, any claim for representativeness from the viewpoint of quantitative analysis would be foolish.

Second, we did not attempt to exhaustively train all the observers at the outset of the observation and for repeated tests of intercoder reliability. Before our methodological workshop, we asked all teams to code the same material (drawn from the film 12 Angry Men) before comparing and discussing the results. In addition, during the workshop, we used different raw material, discussing the meaning and definition of categories as well as the applicability of certain variables. In a more succinct way, these results were fed back to those who could not participate in the workshop. Nevertheless, we have to admit that some categories remain under-specified in the limited timeframe of the workshop.

Third, we have no means to check for the impact of reactivity, in a small group with a researcher watching the proceedings and taking field notes or even completing forms. The argument is that the presence of the researcher influences the group members' behaviours. The problem may even be aggravated by the fact that, in most groups, members knew that the observer was interested in forms of communication. Thus, one may assume that the group members acted in a more controlled and 'polite' way than they would normally. Actually, in some cases group members joked about being under scrutiny from an outsider, especially in the early period of observation, which means that our presence was on people's minds.

Though there is some truth in these critical hints to the reactivity problem, we think that the problem is much less severe than one might expect. First, some groups were not only open to being researched but showed great interest in hearing what an outsider thought of the group's style of discussion, and were keen to receive advice about how to improve the process. Of course, we were not in a position to give such advice, but this attitude suggests that participants had an honest interest in behaving 'naturally' rather than pretending. Second, the self-control of group members in response to the presence of the researcher soon tended to fade, and the 'natural' group dynamics took over. After a while, group members were absorbed by their emotions, interests and stakes in the debate, and simply ignored the researcher. This was even more true when, after some time, the researcher had become a familiar element of a group.

The reactivity problem is also mitigated by the fact that the researchers...
were usually young and had similar social backgrounds to the group members. They were more or less considered as peers whose presence did not require any change to the usual behaviour. In fact, several members of observed groups stated that they usually forgot that they were being observed during the meeting and then – when they realized it at the end of the meeting – retrospectively thought about their own behaviour: 'Did I say something bad?' In other words, reactivity exists in the form of post hoc reflexivity, but probably less in the actual situations under study.

But, despite these arguments relativizing the reactivity problem, we have to point to the crucial importance of trust in the whole enterprise. If the group does not fully trust the researcher, the latter might be asked to leave in tense moments or not to attend a crisis meeting. Or – perhaps more likely – the group will simply not discuss certain issues in the regular session but in informal settings elsewhere. In some cases, the researchers were known to group members before the research began, so that there was already a basis of trust and familiarity. In the case of the Berlin Social Forum, this level of trust remained unchanged even when the group discovered that it had been observed by several undercover secret service agents. Therefore, overall, we are quite confident that our observations did not produce just artefacts.

2.5 Summary

Although our methodological toolkit was mostly a means to an end – namely, studying forms of controversial communication – we retrospectively consider it an achievement in itself and a starting point for similar crossnational studies that engage several researchers in comparative participant observation.

The methodological core of our research consists of three research tools of which, we believe, the controversy protocol is the most innovative and inspiring instrument. While we see some weaknesses in the conceptual and operational details of this tool and the way in which it was applied in our field research, we still think it is a valuable instrument that can be used in any setting where, on the basis of face-to-face communication and not physical aggression, controversies are carried out. Complemented by the two other research tools, controversies can be analysed as nested in several contextual layers: thematic episodes; sessions; and general values, orientation and structure of the group. Based on these instruments as well as interviews/conversations with group members, we are able to get quite a comprehensive insight on the role of participation, power, conflict handling and decision-making in these groups.

Our methodological approach as well as our research design to study – ideally – two different kinds of groups in six European countries have the strengths of offering considerable variation of group structure and group context, and of allowing for an in-depth analysis with a wealth of both standardized and non-standardized data. We would welcome other researchers to apply, criticize and possibly improve upon these instruments in both similar and different settings. For example, the significance of deliberation in social movement groups would become much clearer if meetings in political parties, trades unions and other more formal organizations were coded using the same methodology and compared to our dataset.

References


3 Types and patterns of intragroup controverses

Dieger Rucht

Among the different conceptions of democracy – including the representative, participatory and deliberative variants – the latter is the least clear. While representative and participatory democracy can be operationalized as a set of formal rules that may even materialize as law, deliberative democracy is not an institutionalized concept. Understood as a framework of rules for political decision-making on a large scale, deliberative democracy simply does not exist. At best, a phase of deliberation precedes some political decisions that, ultimately, are based on authoritative decisions of elites or a majority vote, either by delegates or, in cases of a referendum, by an active part of the population.

Deliberative democracy in small and medium-sized groups meeting in physical encounters of the participants is another matter. Is deliberative democracy possible in such a setting? Based on their personal experiences with various kinds of debates, some say that ‘pure’ deliberation as conceptualized by Jürgen Habermas will remain a utopian dream (Weinrich 1972). In reality, they argue, no group is free from conflicting values and interests, power games, hidden agendas and so on. However, other observers claim to have indeed experienced, though probably very rarely, deliberative debate and decision-making (West and Gastil 2004; Ryfe 2006; Haug 2010). Both may be right, insofar as they refer to different ideas or standards of deliberation. Given this possibility, it is worth clarifying the notion of deliberation. But even with such a clarification, divergent perceptions about the (non-)existence of deliberation may remain. Therefore, the question of the existence and forms of deliberation must be submitted to empirical research in which definitional criteria and modes of operationalization are made explicit.

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