This 15-minute film captures a conversation between the users of two social science research methods, surveys and citizens’ juries. The conversation was captured at the end of a session at the fifth Scottish Graduate School of Social Science Summer School in which Andrew Thompson and Jen Roberts drew on their experience of working together in a project that combined these methods to research attitudes to wind farms in Scotland. They describe some of the strengths and limitations of the respective approaches and consider how combining them has the potential to be complementary, despite the different epistemological bases of the two methods. Surveys are generally administered to individuals whereas citizens’ juries are necessarily deliberative, and drawing on the effects on individual members of discussions among the group, but the conversation raises a range of issues that force us to think about the status of each method as well as what happens when they are combined. The film also includes a contribution from the audience at the event.

Transcript of conversation:

JR: Having seen the citizens’ jury process and having seen everyone here today complete the surveys and go through deliberation, what added information do you think that the deliberation brings to surveys and vice versa?

AT: I think it brings a number of aspects to play, one issue about the way we've run the surveys here, and it doesn’t have to be this way but it's the usual way, is it's very individual response based. The advantage of a deliberative process, you are talking about collectives, you are talking about groups getting together to talk about these issues, and that brings with it a dynamism which leads to development of thought. It’s the same with a focus group, for example; it’s not just one opinion, a combination of several opinions being added together.
This is a dynamic process so the actual opinions are developing and transforming during the deliberative process. And I think that can lead to a very different outcome.

One of the things I think we have seen is, if you are asking people individually about what they think, there has been a transformation, okay not dramatic but there has been a shift in the way people are thinking about this which I think is partly about this information deliberative process which is occurring. If you ask people at the beginning to fill in the questionnaire and then talked about something else and filled in the questionnaire again, they’re probably just trying to repeat what they said the first time, because they haven’t been influenced really by any other thought. So I think the two, rub off each other, in a productive way.

JR: I think it’s really fascinating to see the internal reflection process that people are going through when they are encouraged to really take on board these different points of view. And I wonder now I can understand how that might lead to problems when trying to generalise the results following deliberation, how applicable those are to members of the community. And I think that is quite important to bring up because if we are trying to use citizens’ juries or surveys as a means of ensuring that policy is in line with what people want, is what you are suggesting, following deliberation, following this self-reflective process, is that different from what you might have answered at the start and therefore what the wider public might think?

AT: Okay can I put a different argument though?

JR: Please.

AT: We can argue that the deliberative process is an ideal form, but it’s very few, very few people are involved. If you are a Scottish Government policy maker, how confident would you feel only having that data? And would you actually say no I need the survey data as well because I can get a, canvas a wider opinion about these issues.

JR: So as a Scottish Government official, would I want to have a survey of the people of Scotland that’s also informed by this citizen jury process? I’d hope so, I’d hope I would want that. That’s how I think in our view, from the citizens’ jury, results should feed into policy making alongside other methods. It shouldn’t be a replacement of it. And there are different ways in which that process of being fed in could be. Having these two different information sources would be really valuable. But what is also valuable is having the survey throughout the jury process. We are talking about this as a citizens’ jury research project but actually it was a questionnaire project, it was a survey project, it was an ethnography project, there were many different methods involved through the citizen jury. So we were able to analyse how people’s opinions changed in the, after the information phase, after the deliberation phase. And that is really interesting from a research point of view. Does information people’s minds, or is it sharing information and reflecting on that information that changes people’s mind?

AT: There is obviously a consequence or a cost to bringing in several methods. Inevitably what you have to think about if you are a research team, is you have to have the skills to do these different kinds of methods, to bring them together, and also to analyse them alongside each other. Because mixed methods isn’t simply about well here is a qualitative bit of work and here is a quantitative bit of work, it’s actually about how you integrate it. Now you could integrate it at various stages, you don’t have to integrate it at the beginning. Some people do. And think about how questions work with deliberative process alongside it.
Others say no we will create those datasets separately and then through the analytical process try and integrate them. Or they might leave it until post analysis when you are trying to say okay, what are the outcomes and the results, and how do you bring those together, perhaps in a policy framework. So you have to be very clear about when these things come together. But design it from the beginning so that they do work together. But it does raise challenges, you know. We’ve heard already about the problems of ontological and epistemological approaches perhaps being different. Does that matter? Purists would say very much so, you can’t do this. Pragmatists like me would say well you can but you have to be very careful and be aware of these different provenances, if you like, to the data forms you’ve got.

JR: You’ve got to be extremely aware throughout the data collection and processing that these uncertainties or biases don’t creep in. And certainly in the data analysis for this project, by having survey information and by having the principles, we actually analysed them separately. We had a quantitative specialist looking at the panel analysis of the surveys and the statistical meaning within that, and, which is a very interesting point to pick up on in a second. Meanwhile there’s qualitative analysis of the principles going on and we didn’t want the analysis of the principles to be affected by the knowledge of what was coming out of the surveys, because the risk is that even as a researcher your views will be biased by what you know about what the juries think.

So we had a process in place from the very beginning about how that data will be analysed and the different lenses we will be looking through. So bringing together that information, two separate analyses, or I say two, I am simplifying, there were many different approaches that were brought together, you then had to look at each data set through the lens of the other data set to ensure that there were no huge uncertainties and biases coming into play. I think that is a real risk and something to be very aware of in the research data design.

AT: Yes, well there is an interesting question there, and some people might like to reflect on this, is should the results of the, say the first questionnaire, influence how people think in the next phase? I think inevitably everyone here who has filled in the questionnaire, has been influenced, like it or not. It’s started to inculcate that certain view about wind farms, about energy, on-shore wind energy, and so it’s very hard to actually not be influenced. Now we could call it bias but we could also say that’s part of the development of research understanding and how it might influence how that deliberation then takes place. So we could see that as a kind of being a benefit of linking the two in that way. And I just wonder whether in fact we should separate them, separate the analyses, or integrate those analyses?

JR: Or just do them with care and be aware of where those uncertainties might creep in.

And I wanted to bring back the point of the sample size. At the beginning in the introduction I mentioned some of the issues and sampling for the citizens’ juries, that they are quite small groups of people, we are looking at between fifteen and eighteen people. So when you come to take survey results, these four panel surveys that we did during the citizens’ jury process, what you can say mathematically or statistically about eighteen different responses in four different surveys is actually quite difficult. You then aggregate the three juries together; we have fifty four different participants. And you can say something a bit more meaningful. But still there is a real challenge, it was not expected trying to find statistical meaning from the survey data. And actually the qualitative principles that were generated, they were at least very robust in terms of having a majority consensus on it. There wasn’t any issues of trying to work out whether the change was meaningful or, you know, how
much more significant the people who are pro wind farms saw positive benefits versus negative benefits. And it caused a bit of problem for some time, and actually really significant learning for future analyses, because I think what we’d hoped we could do with the data, we couldn’t do as much because the sample size was so small.

AT: Very interesting, though, the way opinions shifted, and the way it did today, that there was a change. And one of the questions as a political scientist is what causes the change? Is it the information phase, is it the reflection in the middle, is it the deliberative phase?

And our evidence, based purely on the surveys would suggest that it’s the information phase rather than the deliberative phase. Whereas you might have thought at the beginning it’s deliberation which will really change people’s views because you have to defend positions, argue about it and come to some agreement, or agreement to differ if necessary. But it wasn’t the case and actually a lot of other research suggests it’s the information phase, but the more we thought about it, deliberation and information don’t occur in isolation from each other. And the fact that the jurors knew they were coming back to a second day to defend certain positions, probably means they deliberated quite a lot about what their positions should be that they are going to defend. And so to say it was information I suspect is simplistic. So I think there would have been a danger, just looking at the survey analysis to say it was about information it wasn’t about deliberation. But because we’ve had this embedded in a citizens’ jury, we can actually say it was a bit more nuanced than that and probably involved both aspects of the process. We can’t say definitively that’s what happened, but it does suggest another way of looking at this data, to interpret it.

JR: And you can have a think about that yourselves as well, about how you think your opinions changed during the deliberation, and whether that was more significant than this information phase.

AT: One of the things which I found fascinating, perhaps because I come from a political background, is how people who thought they weren’t interested in politics at all, because remember this is a random sample, as random as we could make it, of the general population, actually not knowing we were going to be talking about wind farms, they just knew it was something to do with environmental issues, because we didn’t want them to come pre-armed with lots of views. And what emerged out of the end of it was ‘I never knew this kind of political work can be so much fun’. I am engaging with my neighbours in the town or whatever, and I am discovering that we’ve got a lot to talk about. And these issues are important. And even if we don’t agree with each other, we are listening to each other, and we come to some considered views. I think that’s one of the findings we find generally with citizens’ juries. Even if your view point is not the one that carries the day, people are much more accepting of it because they feel as though they have been heard and they have been part of that process.

But obviously you have to make sure you facilitate these groups to make sure that actually happens, to make sure the silent people have a say, the dominant people don’t dominate, and so on, which is a tricky task. Not for us today, but it can be very tricky.

JR: Those are really quite long term benefits that you are putting into the public that participate, these long term building of what we call self-efficacy, this confidence that they have a voice, that they can participate. Most of the jurors said that they would participate again, in fact many of them really wanted to participate, they would say at the final comment, when is the next one? And that is quite unusual for many public forums, to really wish to participate in another two hour debate about a community matter. So that was quite interesting, about what else you are bringing to people by doing this process. And I think
that’s why they say things like mini public and citizens’ juries create this longer term engagement, because what you are doing is, you are investing in time, but you are getting this kind of movement of people that are suddenly very interested and quite informed about the issue, and quite willing to engage with other topics, because they have realised their own capacity to do so.

AT: I think it was really brought home to me, just as a final comment on that, was a woman who was fairly elderly, had never been in any environment like this where this public kind of issue was discussed. And she said ‘I just wish I had known that I could have done this earlier in my life’. And actually she died shortly afterwards, didn’t she? And I was thinking great, we gave her that opportunity.

So I think there are some incredible benefits to open this up for people.

Questions from the audience

Any questions you have got to either or us?

Q: Yes, did you start with quantitative and then qualitative, or you did them at the same time?

AT: Well they are integrated really, so the quantitative part was very much based on the surveys, and there were four of these, one at the beginning of the first day, at the end of the first day, the beginning of the second day, end of the second day and I suppose you might argue the citizens’ jury is a kind of qualitative process in which these surveys were embedded. We designed it to integrate the quantitative in the qual.

JR: Because there is ethnography observation throughout the whole process as well, including during the surveys. And the surveys were not just purely quantitative data; there was a lot of qualitative data generated. And I think one of the things we didn’t pick up in our conversation but it’s also interesting to consider, how much the questions in the surveys would have affected how people then thought about the topic. You did touch on the fact that you really can’t pull apart information and deliberation because the surveys themselves are questions and the questionnaire that you did this morning might have got you thinking about what to bring up in the deliberation. So they were definitely not, the methods were not distinct at all from each other, and they were not one and then the other, it was an entirely integrated process. It was simply the data analysis where, for some parts, were done quite separately.

Contributors

Dr Jen Roberts is an interdisciplinary researcher in the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering at the University of Strathclyde. Her webpage is http://www.strath.ac.uk/staff/robertsjendr/

Professor Andrew Thompson is Chair of Public Policy & Citizenship in the School of Social and Political Science at the University of Edinburgh. His webpage is http://www.sps.ed.ac.uk/staff/politics/thompson_andrew
References and further reading:

The following are recent contributions to the discussion of the methods, and they all contain bibliographies that provide suggestions for further reading.


Mini-publics


Citizens’ juries


Surveys

When Methods Meet


This is specific to health care, but it might be of interest to some as it contrasts surveys with experiments:


**Suggested questions for seminar discussion:**

Is it too simple to say that surveys get at the views of people as individuals while citizens’ juries get at the views of people as members of a group?

Consider: what added information does deliberation bring, that surveys alone wouldn’t harvest? And vice versa.

In the conversation the point is made that the two methods can be combined but with much smaller groups of people for the citizens’ juries than would usually be involved in surveys. What does this mean for the question of whether findings can be generalised?

The outcomes of citizens’ juries are intended to inform decision-makers. What issues or conflicts might arise that could challenge how surveys and citizens’ juries’ results are implemented?

What does the combination of these two methods tell us about the scope for people’s views to be shaped by the information to which they are exposed?

What research designs combining these two methods are most conducive to generating good quality data? And are there ways of combining these two methods that should be avoided?

Does the combination of these methods produce better data for policy-makers than either method used on its own?
Given the inevitable interaction between methods in a mixed/multi-method design, does this produce different findings to those produced by a combination of single methods and is this always desirable?