



Understanding public perceptions in educational assessment

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RM Talks Presentation

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Outline

- Who are the public?

 - Two approaches

- Public opinion, views, trust and confidence

- Do the views of the public matter?

 - Arguments that they do not

 - Arguments that they do

 - Our view

- Conclusions

- For further discussion...

1. Descriptive

- ❑ Distinguished from a group that excludes others (eg members of a private club): purchasers/users of a service can be drawn from “the public”

Jeremy Bentham: the public = “an indefinite number of non-assignable individuals”

- ❑ Some specific roles are open to the public. When they take it up, do they cease to be “the public”?
- ❑ Linked concepts:
 - “customers” (purchasers/users of a service) – neoliberal ideas of treating users/clients of public services as customers
- ❑ “citizens” (how are they defined? how widely flung? – town, country, continent, the world..?) Voters?
- ❑ Taxpayers (legitimising their view on things bought with “their” money)

“Stakeholders”

- ❑ Concept introduced in the 1960s to bring together the interests of stockholders and shareholders in a company’s performance. Developed from the 1980s to widen the reference of commercial firms beyond maximising value for shareholders. Extended to apply more widely to providers of goods and services, encouraging attention to the wishes and benefits of those affected (Freeman, 2010).
- ❑ Stakeholders have some relation to the company’s activity – eg customers, employees, suppliers, communities
- ❑ Talking of stakeholders is now commonplace in assessment contexts (referring to candidates, teachers, parents, employers, ?employees of assessment organisations?)
- ❑ **Are the views of those directly affected by assessment(s) more important than those not affected? Are the views of those most affected the most important?**
- ❑ **(Example) Are the views of parents about school exams more important than the views of non-parents?**

2. Normative

- (i) The “general will” (eg Rousseau) – explicitly **excludes** the particular interests of “stakeholders”:

“There is often a great deal of difference between the will of all and the general will: the latter takes account of private interests and is only a sum of particular wills. But remove from these same wills the plusses and minuses that cancel each other out, and what is left as the sum of differences is the general will.” (*On the Social Contract* (1762), Book 2, ch 3)

- (ii) Can be seen as derived from an implicit social contract (Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Rawls)

- imaginary agreement by individuals regardless of their particular circumstances

- the citizen is both “maker” and “matter” (Hobbes). Creates duties for the state and obligations for the citizen (however defined)

Questions about the normative sense of “public” applied to assessment

- Not clear that the idea of an implied contract with society in general makes sense
- How does this idea apply to private providers? Charities?
- BUT it *is* helpful to think what society as a whole (not just those involved) might expect of assessments. For example:
 - That if we ever had to rely on them, they would mean what they say (validity)
 - That if we ever became involved in the processes of assessment, we would find it fair, respectful and honest....(?)
 - That at a time when high-profile assessments are taking place, the process and environment is acceptable.

“The public sphere” (Habermas)

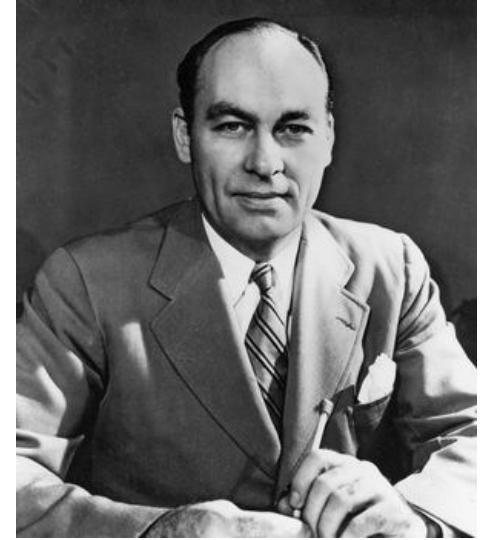
- Places (either real or metaphorical) where people with a common interest come together for dialogue and listening
- An area of dialogue [not just “explanation”] between experts and non-experts?
- Link with discussion about “popular” understanding of science, philosophy....
- (for assessment) – dialogue about technical aspects which the public may not understand or know to ask about, unless provoked to do so by something that happens...

- ❑ Both the descriptive and the normative models are relevant to assessment.
- ❑ Normative: What society could reasonably expect of assessments/assessment providers (whether or not they are “stakeholders” now)
- ❑ But we favour an INCLUSIVE view of the public, that does not exclude their views when they become stakeholders
- ❑ Engaging in the “public sphere” may be important for the assessment industry
- ❑ Implications for research

- A lot of discussion about “trust” and “confidence” in public life (eg Onora O’Neil), education (eg Gunter & Hall) and assessment (eg Mary Richardson)
 - “Trust” and “confidence” can be interchangeable, but:
 - “Trust” can be linked with relying on the trusted party for something (either now or possibly in the future)
 - “Trust” sometimes implies less than full evidence to support knowledge that the good will come about (Borman et al, 2021)
 - Some (eg Hardin, 2006) see “trust” as implying perceived integrity or shared values
 - “Confidence” described as “assurance, based on evidence” (Richardson) – close link to “reliability”

- ❑ Concept neglected in discussions about assessment
- ❑ “Opinion” has two strands of meaning:
 - (a) Less than fully-evidenced belief - a standard below that of knowledge (I don’t know for sure, but in my opinion....”)
 - (b) Including an element of judgement or evaluation (“What is your opinion on introducing a wealth tax?”) – sometimes uses the word “view”

- ❑ 1935: American Institute of Public Opinion started surveys asking questions about social and political issues, e.g. “Are Federal expenditures for relief and recovery too great, too little, or about right?” Became the “Gallup Poll”



- ❑ Both Ofqual and Qualifications Wales commission longitudinal studies of “confidence” about regulated assessments
- ❑ Both use “confidence” as a composite involving beliefs, evaluative judgements (eg “Do you think that marking is accurate?”) “and feelings
- ❑ Ofqual surveyed a range of stakeholders plus “the general public”
- ❑ Qualifications Wales surveyed “a representative sample of 1,000 adults in Wales”.

**Do/should the views of the public on assessment matter?
To the assessment industry – to researchers**

ARGUMENTS AGAINST



- ❑ Some educational experts argue that public opinion should not dictate technical aspects of assessment.
- ❑ **A case for expert guidance?** experts argue that public policy (incl. educational standards) should be based on evidence-based consensus rather than uninformed public opinion.
- ❑ When public opinion is driven by ignorance
 - > can lead to **harmful policy outcomes** (e.g. implementation of ineffective assessment systems)
 - or
 - decline of educational standards.**
- ❑ Prevailing view (experts): non-experts think in terms of 'black & white': experts think in 'shades of grey'(??)
 - > creates a **communication gap** when one group tries to communicate with the other.

- ❑ Clinton & Grisson (2015): asked 1,500 Tennesseans 2 questions:
 - (a) to estimate student achievement in standardised maths tests
 - (b) what they thought the gap was between the achievement (in maths) of different races of students
- ❑ They were then told the accurate figures.
- ❑ Generally, the first time they were asked the public were **too optimistic about maths attainment levels, and thought the achievement gap between different races was bigger than it was.**
- ❑ They were asked a second time, having been told the correct figures, but
 - ❑ **many stuck to their prior (false) belief about the race achievement gap.**

❑ Issues relating to public's perception of **precision and accuracy** in educational assessments

- accuracy and precision are measures of observational error;
- accuracy is how close a given set of measurements is to the true value;

Accurate results are correct

- precision is how close repeated measurements are to each other.

Precise results are consistent

You can have high precision without accuracy (consistent but wrong) or accuracy without precision (correct average but scattered)

❑ Recent research suggests that in UK public perception of errors in national examinations > simply mistakes; events that are preventable.

- **perception predominates over more sophisticated technical view** - errors arise from many sources, creating an inevitable variability in assessment outcomes.
- perception seems to **invest assessment grades/marks with precision and accuracy of scientific measurements.**

- ❑ **Public perception of error:** does not sit easily with academic and professional understanding that **grades/marks are assigned, variable grades rather than measured** (Gardner, 2013)
 - Lack of awareness about prevailing unreliability/variability of **all** marking (?) (Wiliam, 1996)

Misunderstanding leads to increased public disappointment, media pressure, and distrust when results do not align with expectations.

2. Public views are inconsistent

□ Attempts to measure error reveal inconsistency and change (see Popkin - *The Reasoning Voter*, 1991).

- problems arise not necessarily because public is insufficiently educated, informed, or motivated.
- Ambivalence is simply an immutable fact of human nature - experience of holding two opposing feelings, thoughts, or desires toward a person, object, or situation simultaneously.

- consequently, public use information shortcuts when making decisions with new and personal information driving out old, impersonal information to guide their views, leading to potentially **unstable or volatile public opinion**.

“Low information rationality” (coined by Samuel Popkin, 1991)

- voters use heuristics- such as personal experiences, party cues, or media summaries - rather than deep political knowledge to make informed decisions.
- suggests people make rational choices despite limited information by using shortcuts, though these can sometimes lead to, or be compounded by, cognitive biases

3. The “general public” lacks a legitimate role – what business is it of theirs?

- ❑ Education – and especially assessment – may not feature much in people’s lives, other than at key life events
 - compare important but seldom-discussed aspects of health/social care (eg treatment of deafness, disability)
- ❑ Danger that views of people not currently involved in education are out of date or reflect partial/selective/honeyed recollection of their own experience
- ❑ Members of the public may have a “stake” in educational assessment that they don’t recognise (e.g. through their job or contact with family/friends) but why should their views matter beyond that?

4. Dangers of populism/ bias/listening to influencers/tribal politics

- ❑ If influencers come from a particular cultural, ideological or political ‘camp’, their influence may promote/consolidate that position in their followers
 - > **biased opinions on questions about education.**
 - impact of influencers > “**confirmation bias**” in supporters - only consider sources of “information” that come from same ‘camp’.
- ❑ Confirmation bias (APA Dictionary) - cognitive tendency to search for, interpret, favour, and recall information that confirms pre-existing beliefs/hypotheses.
 - unintentional bias leads people to ignore contradictory evidence, overvalue supporting data, and make poor decisions
 - strongest for emotionally charged or deeply held beliefs

4. Dangers of populism/ bias/listening to influencers/tribal politics

Confirmation bias in education - tendency of students & teachers to favour information confirming existing beliefs, hindering critical thinking and objective assessment.

It leads to ignoring contradictory evidence, reinforcing stereotypes, and creating “echo chambers”.

- ❑ **“Echo chambers”**: “a bounded, enclosed media space that has the potential to both magnify the messages delivered within it and insulate them from rebuttal” (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008, p.76).
 - serve to **hasten the dissemination of misinformation.**

- ❑ **“The audit explosion”** (Michael Power, 1997) - Since 1980s rise in auditing activity e.g. teaching audits - **roots in political demands for accountability and control.**
- ❑ **Standards for accountability can be conflicting/incoherent** (e.g. (to universities) accept more students, maintain standards..)
- ❑ Danger of **perverse incentives** (e.g. schools/students/teachers choosing “easier” exam boards or subjects to get better grades)
- ❑ **Accountability to whom? The public? The regulator?**

- ❑ **‘Regulatory burden’** - criticism of the Office for Students (independent regulator of HE in England) by the House of Lords Industry and Regulators Committee (2023) – Lord Hollick:

“it was evident throughout our inquiry that the OfS is failing to deliver and does not command the trust or respect of either providers, or students, the very people whose interests it is supposed to defend.”

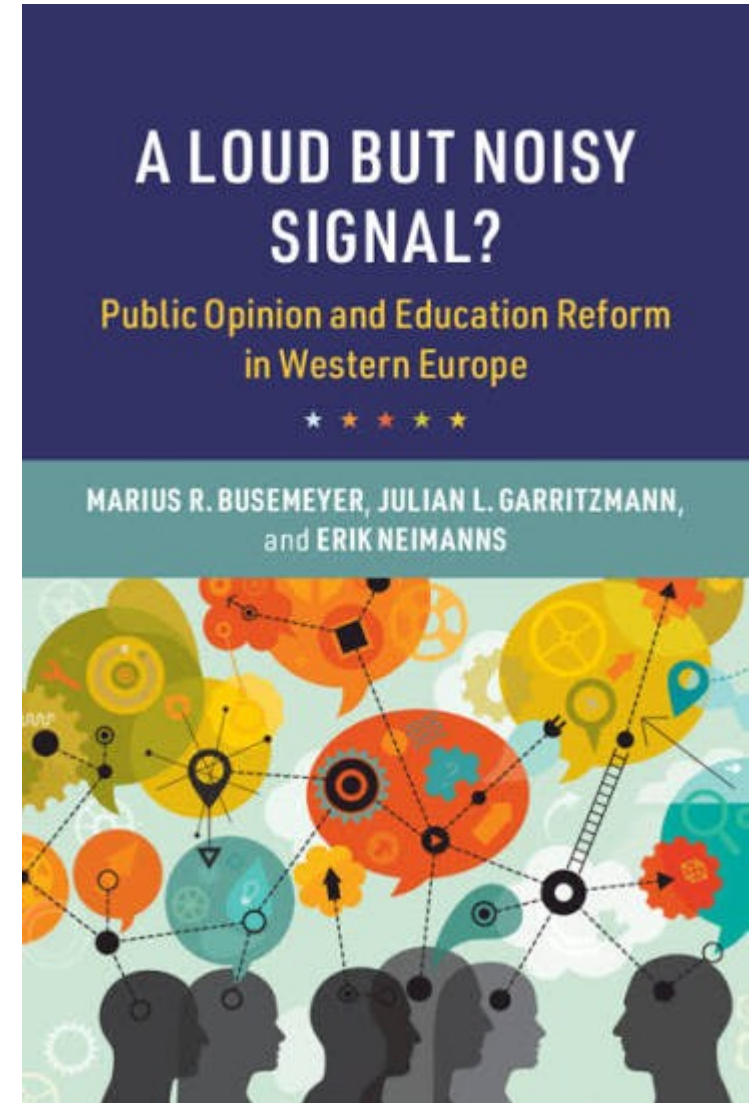
- ❑ **Can damage teaching, learning and professional pride in education:**

“The pursuit of even more perfect accountability provides citizens and consumers, patients and parents with more information, more comparisons, more complaints systems; but it also builds a culture of suspicion, low morale, and may ultimately lead to professional cynicism. And then we would have grounds for public mistrust.”
(O’Neill, 2002, p.57)

6. Public opinion focuses on the wrong things

- ❑ Understanding public opinion is important, as public opinion can significantly influence public policy (Burstein, 2003), **but this to some extent depends on how salient the issue itself is**
- ❑ Busemeyer, Garritzmann & Neimanns (2020) - public opinion affects policy-making when **topic is salient and when most people share the same opinion.**
- ❑ Yet when public disagrees on what they want (or when many people don't care)
 - **influence of public opinion is significantly reduced.**

Matters mainly when issue is salient and the public agrees on which direction to take policy responses.



- **Core finding** Busemeyer, Garritzmann, & Neimanns (2020): **States of ‘salience’**
 - public opinion has greatest influence in a world of ‘loud’ politics, when **salience is high and attitudes are coherent.**

In contrast

- when **issues are salient but attitudes are conflicting**, the signal of public opinion turns ‘loud, but noisy’ and party politics have a stronger influence on policy making.
 - in the case of ‘quiet’ politics, **when issue salience is low, interest groups are dominant.**
- Implications for anyone seeking to make sense of policy-makers' selective responsiveness to public demands and concerns.

ARGUMENTS FOR



- ❑ Consequential risk to assessment organisations and their users if public opinion is ignored
 - could lead to criticism (deserved or undeserved) in the media or by politicians
 - danger of public organisations being blamed/scapegoated and closed down or replaced
 - could prompt demands for change that are not evidence-based or could be educationally harmful

- ❑ Gaps in the world of opinion are dangerous – can be filled with false beliefs: better filled with conversation/explanation

□ Possible **roles** in which sectors of the public could have a right to have their voices heard about educational assessment:

(a) As **customers**/purchasers of services (directly or indirectly, through schools or public authorities) – contractual rights

(b) As **taxpayers** (in most countries education (including assessment) is about 10% of public expenditure and 5% of GDP. Taxpayers fund national systems, even if they opt out and use private alternatives.

(c) As **voters**

Democratic theory: public views can impel voters to vote to change governments or local councils.

But education has only a small part in most manifestos, and educational assessment an even smaller part

Does the public have a right to be heard when no election is due? If they're not registered to vote?

- Is the public entitled to have a view on what a good society would look like?
- Should service providers be influenced by those views?
- Where does education and educational assessment fit in such a vision?
- Is the legitimacy of public views impaired by imperfect understanding/mistaken beliefs/self-interest?

3. Expertise – a middle way?

- ❑ The **demarcation** debate (philosophy of science): can science be left to the scientists?
e.g. a decision by the UK Government to lower evidential standards for some cancer drugs in order to enable more to be available to the public (Stephen John, 2021).
Decision influenced by social/political argument.
- ❑ Should educational assessment be an **epistocracy**, left to the experts, governed by their own understanding and standards, and policed by their own internal quality assurance?
- ❑ One view: don't interfere with professional "gold standards"
- ❑ The opposite view: the professional standards are culturally/ socially determined anyway – demarcation is just an excuse for the experts not being held to account
- ❑ The "gold standards" may be a convenient professional myth
- **Is there a middle way?**

- ❑ Provide a **language and literature** to enable the public and the experts to listen to each other
 - Dewey's view: **expert and non-expert members of the public need each other.**
- ❑ Need for the experts to win trust to exercise their professional knowledge and skills
 - recognise when that trust has been shaken (eg a news story about a bad mistake)
- ❑ Need to **negotiate a demarcation line** – which should always be open to challenge and may be moved.
- ❑ The public can be helped to understand how to make sense of experts' knowledge (Ólafsson, 2017)
- ❑ Gaps can be filled by disinformation

- ❑ Jeremy Bentham: the “tribunal” of public opinion
- ❑ The trend in the early 2000s to favour “light touch” regulation was discredited by the banking crisis of 2008 (in the UK, the collapse of Northern Rock and the government rescues of HBOS and Royal Bank of Scotland) (Turner Review, 2009)
- ❑ Who regulates the regulator? Risk of regulatory capture?
- ❑ Need for regulators to negotiate space for an accountability dialogue with the regulated, ***and for that conversation to be shared with the public***

- ❑ Both the **descriptive** and the **normative** accounts of public views are **relevant**
- ❑ Some strength in “stakeholder” theory giving weight to those whose lives are most affected by assessment(s)
- ❑ **But** also, a **wider moral case** based on public views of **what a good society looks like**
- ❑ Acknowledge the strengths of some of the arguments against giving weight to public opinion (e.g. risk of bias, lack of expertise/ understanding, accountability going to extremes...)
- ❑ **But** it’s possible to take account of public views in a way that mitigates some of these harms; and there are **dangers in not doing so**.
- ❑ **Need for an external window on internal quality assurance**

- ❑ “Public opinion is an illusive commodity” (Brookings Institute, 2003) – deceptive rather than a reality
- ❑ Do **we** have a duty to explain assessment concepts to a public audience?
 - Even concepts that are difficult to explain (e.g. setting grade boundaries; exams with “pass marks” of 20%)?
- ❑ Do **we** have lessons to learn from other disciplines (e.g. explaining science – renowned maths and science communicators Prof. Hannah Fry & Prof. Brian Cox; medicine)
- ❑ What does all this mean for **research**?
- ❑ **Is it our responsibility to explain and listen?**

OVER TO YOU!!

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