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Research Report

Between the lifeworld and academia: Defining political issues in social science education

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Keywords: social science education, political education, lifeworld, political issues

Highlights:

- We identified four aspects for defining political issues.
- Political issues are collective.
- Political issues are conflictual in nature.
- Political issues are contemporary issues.
- Issues are political due to contextual factors.

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to discuss mutual understandings of political issues among students and academics. The aim is to suggest a framework that teachers can use to address politics from both the discipline's and the students' perspectives.

Design/methodology/approach: This study is based on semi-structured interviews with twelve students in six upper secondary schools and eight social science academics in Norway and Sweden.

Findings: We identified four guiding aspects for defining political issues in social science education to connect disciplinary thinking with students' views of the political. These aspects are: 1) collective, 2) contemporary, 3) conflictual, and 4) contextual.

Limitations: This study relied on interviews with a selection of students and academics and what they chose to express. The results may not be applicable to other samples.

Implications: The framework presented can be used in social science education to understand and discuss the nature of political issues.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Most democratic countries have a school subject that addresses the political world. However, these subjects vary widely in terms of content and aims. In the United States and Canada, the political perspective is incorporated in a broad social studies subject tackling historical and contemporary issues (Barton, 2011), while other school systems have focused on a cross-curricular subject of citizenship education. In the Nordic countries, the political world has been assigned to the school subject of social science with strong links to the academic disciplines of political science, sociology, economics and law (Sandahl, 2015; Børhaug, 2011; Christensen, 2011). These types of school subjects have in common the study of human activity in society, the inquiry of different social issues and the consideration of the role of values in these issues (Barton, 2011).

With young people's conventional political participation in decline, researchers have highlighted the role of schools in contributing to students' attitudes, experiences, knowledge, abilities and skills needed in order to be active participants in a democratic society (Campbell, 2012). Often, researchers have emphasised the role of the disciplinary perspective as an important part of teaching (Sandahl, 2015; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008; Blanck & Löden, 2017). At the same time, many researchers have refuted the claim that young people are not engaged with politics (Flanagan, 2013; Sloam, 2007, 2014; Tonge, 2009; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Delli Carpini, 2006). Rather, young people engage in different activities than their parents did; in other words, they may not participate in 'big politics', such as elections, but in 'little politics' or 'lifestyle politics' (Kahne, Crow, & Lee, 2013). This shift in focus requires teachers to approach politics in new ways by engaging with traditional disciplinary understandings of politics, as well as the new ways that young people understand and engage with the political.

Authors of educational and didactical studies have discussed this duality as an issue of addressing social issues with regard to internal significance and external relevance (Sandahl, 2019; Bladh, Stolare, & Kristiansson, 2018; Nordgren, 2017). Internal significance relates to specialised knowledge originating from an academic discipline, that is, the way social scientists understand and analyse politics. Researchers aim to produce knowledge, and their interests are closely tied with the specialisation of their field, while educators need principles of (external) relevance relating to societal, cultural and individual expectations. Thus, teachers must identify how to approach content in relation to students' experiences and interests while determining how to make teaching relevant to students in the present and future (cf. Klafki, 2001).

The aim of this paper is to examine and discuss possible intersections between internal significance and external relevance with regard to the political. More specifically, we examine and discuss perspectives on what characterises political issues from two points of view: students and social science academics. The research questions posed are as follows:

- What are students' and social science academics' perceptions of what constitutes political issues?
- What mutual ways of framing politics that address internal significance as well as external relevance can be identified?

To answer these questions, we conducted an interview study among upper secondary school students and social science academics in Norway and Sweden. In the following sections, we first review previous research on young people's political engagement and relation to politics. We then present a theoretical framing consisting of perspectives on the nature and limits of the political and the relationship between the political and the lifeworld before describing the methodological aspects of the study. Finally, we present our findings and discuss four guiding aspects for approaching political issues in social science education.

1.1 Previous research on young people's relation to politics

As a consequence of the downward trend in young people's conventional political participation, several scholars have worked to include young people's definitions of politics when determining what constitutes political engagement (Kallio & Häkli, 2013; Manning, 2010; Marsh, O'Toole, & Jones, 2007; O'Toole, 2003). First, such studies have found that young people have tended to relate politics to government, politicians and the running of a country (Mathé, 2017; O'Toole, 2003; Sloam, 2007). Second, they have indicated that young people's perceptions of politics are often related to their life situations and personal experiences (Harris & Wyn, 2009; O'Toole, 2003). A common aspect of young people emphasizing personal experiences was that they were interested in and held strong convictions relating to local issues that affected them personally (Harris & Wyn, 2009; O'Toole, 2003; Sloam, 2007). Third, some young people have associated politics with positive goals and issues, including the possibility of changing the status quo and making a difference on issues they cared about (Mathé, 2017; O'Toole, 2003; Sloam, 2007). Fourth, some young people have related politics to the activities of discussion and debates, which are often aimed at expressing and sharing opinions as well as compromising; additionally, they viewed these activities as important aspects of politics for both citizens and politicians (Mathé, 2017). Students' ideas about politics are shaped by many factors and on several arenas, such as families, social media, peers, and in the classroom. While we do not argue a linear relationship, we assume that students' understanding of the political sphere is in part related to what they are taught in school. In the Scandinavian context, which is the context of this study, there are indications that students have been presented with definitions of politics centred around representative democracy, elections and party politics, i.e., a focus on the formal aspects of politics that researchers in social science education have found to be dominant in political education (Mathé, 2017; Sandahl, Tväråna & Jakobsson, 2022; Børhaug, 2008).

At the same time, research on young people's political engagement has developed from

viewing political engagement as a matter of voting in elections to including a broader repertoire of activities and interests (Dalton, 2011; Zukin et al., 2006). For example, several studies have refuted the claim that today's young people are not engaged with politics (Flanagan, 2013; Sloam, 2007, 2014; Tonge, 2009; Zukin et al., 2006). These studies have argued that young people engage actively in different civic and political activities than older generations did. Kahne et al. (2013) described this phenomenon as a focus shift from 'big P' politics (e.g., elections) to 'little p' politics, a more direct form of 'lifestyle politics', self-expression and community-based work. Dalton (2008) described a development from duty-based to engaged citizenship and stated that the norms of engaged citizenship are increasing, particularly among young people. In line with this development, others have found that young people feel unheard by politicians and consequently withdraw from formal political activities and that some young people reject the label of 'politics' (Manning, 2010; Sloam, 2007). Many young people engage in newer forms of participation, such as signing petitions and engaging in politics as individuals rather than as part of large organisations (e.g., Fieldhouse, Tranmer, & Russell, 2007; Quintelier, 2007; Sloam, 2014). They are interested in and motivated by a range of political issues, such as dealing with global warming, navigating migration and immigration, and addressing poverty (Mathé, 2017; Dalton, 2011; Sloam, 2014). Combined, recent research has indicated that young people are involved and show their concerns in many different ways. While not cynical about politics and its ends, some are cynical about politicians and how the political system currently works (Dalton, 2008). Moreover, studies have found that while citizenship education does contribute to young people's political engagement, students have unequal access to such learning opportunities, even within classrooms (Hoskins & Janmaat, 2019). This review of literature demonstrates that young people's understanding of and engagement with the political is multifaceted and complex. In the classroom, it may be challenging to combine students' lifeworld perspectives and their political context and day-to-day political news with disciplinary knowledge. To contribute to such combination, or even integration, we therefore aim to examine possible intersections between students' perspectives on politics and those of representatives from the discipline of social scientists.

2 THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE POLITICAL

Notions of the political and how societies educate young people to relate to the political form the theoretical point of reference for this study. In this section, we begin by giving an overview of important contributions to the debate on conceptions of politics to provide some dimensions of politics to frame students' and academics' perspectives. In particular, we focus on the boundaries of politics and the role of conflict. Second, although people are informed in various ways about the political in many different areas of society, school has always been an important arena for disseminating knowledge about, cultivating values for, and engaging with democracy and politics. Thus, insights from the literature on political education are valuable for discussing students' and academics' perceptions of what constitutes political issues. We discuss these insights below.

Most scholars agree that politics contains an element of disagreement and pluralism, but major disagreements abound concerning the boundaries of the political, for example, in distinguishing between public and private matters. These debates have led many theorists to try to delineate the concept of politics and create criteria for its use. For example, in limiting the scope of politics, Crick (2000) claimed that including all discussion, conflict, struggle and conciliation in the conceptualisation of politics ignores or forgets the fact that politics depends on some settled order, such as a state. Others, such as feminist thinkers (Bryson, 2016; Zerilli, 2006), have challenged and critiqued conceptions of politics focusing on the state, public decision-making and institutions. While issues such as sexual violence are today generally considered social and politically debated issues, the so-called public–private divide is still a part of the debate on the delineation of politics (Barry, 2000; Crick, 2000).

As exemplified by the feminist critique of political theory, conceptions of politics have developed over time along with societal changes (Enroth, 2004), but some elements seem to remain relatively stable (Enroth, 2004). One characteristic that has been central to the debate since the 20th century is the conflictual nature of politics (Bartolini, 2018; Mouffe, 2005). To various degrees, political theory has emphasised the role of conflict in politics and viewed value and interest conflicts between groups and individuals as unavoidable or even constitutive of politics. In this view, such conflicts necessitate a system to deal with them to maintain order and peace in a society. In Mouffe's (2005) terminology, 'politics' denotes the practices and institutions (the systems) through which 'the political' – the antagonistic dimension of human societies – is channelled and organised. Several theorists have related the debate on the boundaries of politics to the conflictual perspective (Barry, 2000; Held, 1991) by suggesting that expanding the label of politics to matters outside of the political system of a state opens for stronger regulation of what have traditionally been seen as issues in the private sphere, such as matters of family and reproduction. Barry (2000) further argued that when used on such issues, the label of politics leads them to be perceived as discordant and conflictual rather than cooperative. Central to the widening of the concept of politics outside the formal state apparatus are issues of power hierarchies. Where politics is related to power relations and the use of power among people in various relationships, it may be hard to delimit what does and does not constitute politics.

We picture perspectives of politics as a continuum. At one end are views that see politics as more or less co-extensive with the whole range of human activity, and at the other end are conceptions linked more directly to the state (Bartolini, 2018; Held, 1991). This spectrum can be seen in political science as a research field, with researchers engaged in issues stretching from political campaigns to feminist enquiry into personal spheres and their connections to larger social and political structures and conflicts. In this article, we use these dimensions of politics to identify students' and social science academics' approaches to what characterises political issues.

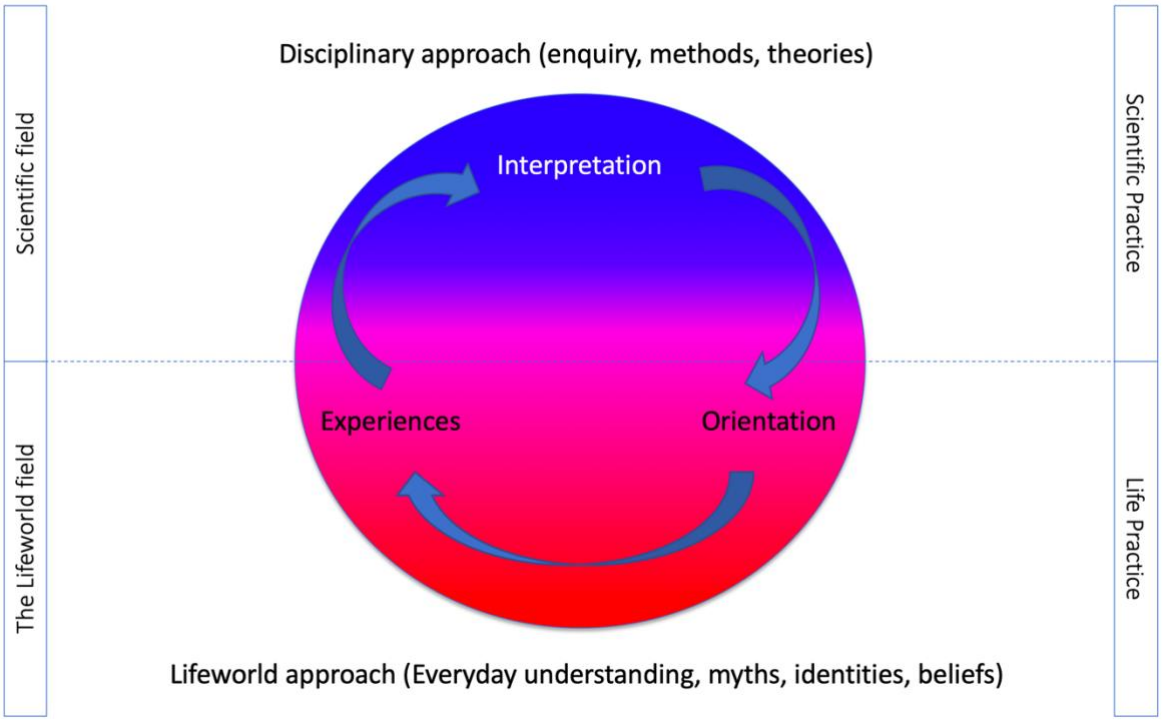
2.1 The political and the lifeworld

The political is mostly formulated in the scientific realm, with political science as the most prominent epistemological community (cf. Young, 2013), but it is also present in everyday life and thereby present in what can be referred to as the lifeworld – originating from Husserl (1970) and continued by Habermas (1987). A lifeworld, as we understand it, refers to the perceptible and subjective world as people remember and perceive it. A lifeworld contains the subjective experiences, memories and knowledge of individuals that form an identity. Accordingly, every individual holds a world view filled with beliefs, myths, ideological persuasions and prejudices that are subjective and, in many cases, contradictory to the 'objective truths' obtained by the scientific community. However, the lifeworld is also larger than the individual and its community of friends and family and includes society as a collective bound together through communicative acts, collective memories and shared narratives (Berger & Luckmann, 1991).

The lifeworld should not be seen solely as a contradistinction to the 'objective' realm of scientific knowledge. In practice, the boundaries between the subjective lifeworld and the objective scientific world are often blurred, particularly so in the humanities and social sciences, where research is often subject to interpretations of human communication, thinking and action. As many social science concepts are also widely used in everyday conversations, students bring with them prior understandings emanating from the lifeworld, or everyday understandings similar to theories on conceptual change or conceptual development (Sinatra et al., 2014; Hedges, 2012). As such, students' understandings are shaped and developed in a negotiation between or combination of everyday and disciplinary perspectives. However, for heuristic reasons, we will keep these two fields separate in order to understand the interaction between them in regard to political education. In social science teaching, political, social and economic issues give birth to value-laden enquiries that invoke subject beliefs and ideas (i.e., the lifeworld). The given beliefs that an individual holds in regard to such issues will inevitably be invoked and will influence his or her understanding of the issues at hand. Yet, the lifeworld is not static: as we have new experiences and obtain new knowledge, our understanding of the world changes and we reshape our attitudes and behaviour in accordance with this new understanding.

In social science education, it is seen as self-evident that the scientific field (e.g., political science, sociology) is an important source of knowledge and that this knowledge has a prominent place in school curricula (Sandahl, 2015; Blanck & Lödén, 2017). Yet, political education also aims at appealing to young people's political engagement in societal affairs and thus invokes their identity and beliefs. To consider the connections between these two worlds, we would like to suggest a model adapted from history education (Rüsen, 2005). The model demonstrates the two fields with regard to social science education (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: An illustration of the process of experiencing, interpreting, and orienting to societal phenomena (Sandahl, 2019; adapted from Rüsen, 2005; 2017).*



*The process of trying to make sense of societal issues will involve a process of using past experiences to interpret specific issues and events. The interpretation will result in orientations that guide the individual in their assessment and future actions. In social science education students will not only rely upon their past experiences and understandings as teaching will give new experiences, concepts and modes of analysis that emanate from the social sciences.

The lower part of the model represents the lifeworld and the life practices that students bring with them to the classroom. It consists of dynamic experiences, myths and legends that make up their understanding of the world around them and ultimately contributes to defining their political identity and guides them in their political life and negotiations with others. Using a temperature analogy, this side is 'hot' and can sometimes be challenging to question and discuss. One important aim of social science education is to bring these experiences to the 'cold' side, where politics is seen not as personal positioning but as issues that can be interpreted, analysed and critically reviewed through disciplinary enquiry. This side involves engaging in and analysing issues founded using evidence and social scientific concepts like causality, structure/agency and perspective-taking. That is, the disciplinary side offers tools for interpretation that can also be used when the disciplinary side meets the lifeworld, for example in the social science classroom. While it can be interjected that the two sides have different purposes or functions for students' relation to the political, we argue that they are mutually related and, indeed, necessary to contribute to the aims of social science education - the disciplinary side contributes with specialised knowledge, while the lifeworld is essential for students' perceptions of the subject's relevance (Sandahl, 2019). New knowledge, context and perspectives from the

social sciences can change students' ideas, take them beyond their own experiences and help shape new understandings to orient themselves in political issues. However, it is important to stress that students will make interpretations and orient in their everyday life - the process is not dependent upon disciplinary approaches. Rather, we see the scientific field as the specific contribution of social science education which has the potential to advance students' understanding of political issues through substantial and procedural concepts (Sandahl, 2015). To enable this process, the lifeworld and discipline need to meet, as represented by the temperate colour purple in the model. This model of the political and the lifeworld serves as a theoretical backdrop for our analysis of students' and academics' perspectives on what characterises political issues. Next, we describe the methods used to collect and analyse the data for this study.

3 METHODS

In this section, we detail the process of data collection and analysis of the present study. We used qualitative semi-structured interviews to access the participants' perspectives, aiming to identify their expressed perceptions of what makes issues political and what characterises more or less political issues.

3.1 Participants

Because of the diverse conceptions of politics already discussed (Bartolini, 2018; Crick, 2000; Held, 1991; Mouffe, 2005), it was important to allow for different conceptions of politics among the interviewees. For the student sample, we contacted social science teachers at six schools in Norway and Sweden and asked them to invite students to participate in the study. Twelve students volunteered to participate, five boys and seven girls. All the students were 16 years old at the time of the interviews. The students varied in terms of their interest in and experience with politics. The student sample also included variation in geographical setting (urban–rural), and the sampled schools were in the mid to high echelon of upper secondary schools in their area.

To include a diverse sample of social science academics, we interviewed eight scholars engaged in the field of political science or other social science fields with an interest in political issues in Norway and Sweden. Through purposive sampling (Tashakkori, Johnson, & Teddlie, 2020), we contacted ten scholars, eight of whom agreed to participate in the study (five women and three men).

3.2 Data collection

Previous studies have shown the importance of exploring young people's conceptions of politics and avoiding closed categories (Kallio & Häkli, 2013; Manning, 2010; O'Toole, 2003). We therefore planned and conducted individual interviews (Creswell, 2013) with the participants in Sweden and Norway to explore their expressed perceptions in depth.

We conducted all the interviews at the students' schools and the academics' offices and either audio or video recorded each interview.

We based the interviews on a semi-structured interview guide (Kvale, 2007) focusing on the participants' perspectives on the nature of politics, what makes issues political and what characterises more or less political issues. We used the same interview guide for all the interviews and actively asked follow-up questions, allowing participants to elaborate and clarify their responses, as well as inviting them to mention specific examples of issues. Immediately following each interview, we transcribed the audio-recorded or video-recorded interviews verbatim in their entirety.

3.3 Data analysis

To answer the research questions, the data-driven analysis without predefined analytic categories (Kripendorff, 2004) consisted of three main phases. First, we read each transcript and highlighted phrases in the responses to get an overview of the material. This process allowed for initial data sorting. Second, we used descriptive coding to categorise statements and keywords based on the participants' characterisation of political issues (King & Horrocks, 2010), such as *society*, *national issues*, and *disagreement*. The keywords were always categorised based on their context in the interview transcripts. In the third stage of data analysis, we examined the interviews to identify thematic commonalities across interviews to develop a more interpretative coding in which we looked for mutual understandings as well as different aspects of the political and political issues that came across in the interview transcripts (King & Horrocks, 2010; Kripendorff, 2004. p- 107-108). This resulted in the following four main aspects: 1) collective, 2) contemporary, 3) conflictual, and 4) contextual, which we elaborate on in Section 4.

3.4 Research credibility and ethics

To ameliorate the possible risk of teachers serving as gatekeepers (Busher & James, 2012), we asked students to confirm that they were still willing to participate at the beginning of the interview. All participants signed consent forms and were informed that they could withdraw their consent at any time. We anonymised the collected data following the transcription of the interviews and adhered to ethical guidelines pertaining to each country at the time of data collection.

Qualitative interviews provide only limited insight into participants' thoughts because they rely on willing expression, so we claim access only to participants' expressed ideas and perspectives. The questions asked may have influenced the participants' answers, despite being open-ended and allowing time for reflection and follow-up comments. However, we have taken steps to strengthen emic validity, that is, the accurate reporting of participants' perspectives (Tashakkori et al., 2020). To start, we actively used member-checking and follow-up questions during the interviews to ensure that the participants'

intended meanings were represented. We have also provided several direct quotations, which are low-inference descriptions, in this article. The sample used in this study covers some diversity in the participants' perspectives, but it does not allow for generalisation (Tashakkori et al., 2020). Readers may, however, make naturalistic generalisations by comparing their groups' demographics and other characteristics to those of the participants in this study (Johnson & Christensen, 2017).

4 FINDINGS

In this section, we present the study's findings based on the four main aspects identified in the qualitative analysis. Overall, although there were differences between the students and the academics and within these two participant groups, it is interesting to note the commonalities in the ways in which they described political issues and their characteristics. Throughout the findings, we present excerpts of the interview transcripts that illustrate important patterns and aspects of the analysed material.

4.1 Collective

The interviews suggested that the participants perceived political issues as those that affect groups of people rather than individuals. Particularly, they saw issues that affect society as a whole (e.g., national political issues or beyond) as being more political than issues affecting smaller groups of people, such as families. The collective dimension of political issues ran across the academics' responses in the sense that political decisions have consequences for people and that making political decisions requires weighing the interests of different groups of people. The social scientist Peter stated the belief that our contemporary and connected societies are political in their cores and that literally everything can be seen as politics:

> If you think about politics more generally [not solely as institutional politics], politics is everywhere. I don't think I can think of any kind of issues that are outside of politics because politics is indistinguishable from power. The only possibility to get away from that is for someone to live absolutely isolated from the rest of the world without interaction with other people. With this most radical view on power, however, one would say that even this person would exert power on his or her environment in the search for food and such. […] In this sense, nothing is outside of politics. (Peter, social scientist)

Peter here highlights the interconnectedness of politics and power and the relationality of the two. This line of reasoning also appeared when Max, a political scientist, repeatedly linked politics to public debate and our shared discussions on what a good society is. For Max, the political was an issue of not only collectiveness, but also the power relations present in such collective aspects of politics:

> I don't think it's possible to distinguish what is political or not. Where there is exercise of power, there is also politics… […] Trying to differentiate public issues from private, I mean that's not really possible to make that distinction. Often, they are both… For instance, your relation to your employer at work… It could be seen as a private relationship, but it's also one of the most public issues we could think about. Or the relations between men and women – they are interwoven with societal structures… […] I don't really see any point in differentiating them. However, that doesn't mean that everything should be regulated and that politicians should interfere with them, just that they can still be political. (Max, political scientist)

While the academics related the political to power structures and the boundaries of the political in terms of the individual and society, students emphasised other aspects of the collective nature of politics. They distinguished between more or less political issues and argued that issues that are private or of interest to only a few people, as well as 'unimportant' issues, such as which film to watch or gossip about celebrities, are less political. One student, Robert, argued:

> When the gossip newspapers write about celebrities and so… it's not really about politics, since it's just about one person and not about issues in society. Then, I would say it's not political. The bigger political issues are those that affect most of us, like the use of our taxes, which is a big thing for a lot of people. (Robert, student)

Other students linked politics to questions in which everyone should have a say, implicitly making them collective. The student Lisa began her argument in this way but quickly realised that her example of the private sphere also had implications for the collective level:

> This might sound strange, but I think about questions where everyone could cast a vote about what they think. I mean, we wouldn't cast a vote about supper plans but on whether or not we should continue with nuclear power […] and how much power we should produce. The supper thing is a decision for my family, but of course, it is affected by politics, like if meat is forbidden. I mean, that is politics. (Lisa, student)

However, while students did not draw a straight line between the individual and collective, they also talked about the difference between national and local issues. Specifically, they argued that national issues affect more people and are therefore more political, while local issues are of relevance to only a few people. One of the students, Erica, reflected on nuances in the national–local dimension in relation to one particular issue: the use of marine resources off Norway's coast. Norway has experienced resistance against opening up new areas for oil drilling in areas rich in fish. Although this resistance can be found across the country, the student argued that the people living in the affected

areas have opposed the petroleum industry, while the rest of the country in general has been in favour of extended searches for oil. Still, she saw this as a very political issue because it would affect the rest of the nation in the long run.

4.2 Conflictual

The conflictual nature of political issues was an aspect in both the students' and academics' responses. The interviewees described such conflicts as characterised by disagreements relating to values and priorities in terms of resource use. For example, several academics reflected that issues that are more political are issues that are characterised by antagonism or are related to the distribution of goods and burdens. Julia, a political scientist, reflected on this:

> Yes, I'd say that's true [that some issues are more political] – that you can classify politics in that way. Take redistribution policy, for example, where you take from somebody and give it to someone else – that's conflictual and thereby political unless you have more than enough to hand out and everybody's happy. So, what's controversial… when you have to prioritise, it is definitely more political since it puts interests against each other. (Julia, political scientist)

Martha, a PhD student in political science, demonstrated the same line of reasoning. She emphasised conflicts, interests and common decision making as good criteria for defining politics. Martha expressed the belief that, in many cases, political science is too focused on the institutional framework and the structures of politics, making politics 'drained of blood'. Addressing the question of whether political science has anything to offer to give it more blood, she answered:

> Yes, but the problem is that it doesn't always do that, and I think it is a pity. I mean, of course, there are several ways of doing this, but I think that political science should infuse more blood into students' encounters with politics. I mean, what are the values discussed here? What are we really talking about, and what are they really arguing about? Also, these kinds of questions make it possible to relate politics to everyday experiences and not just policy-making processes, if you know what I mean. (Martha, political science)

Thus, this criterion pertains to norms and values in a society and to financial matters (which often overlap in politics) and relates to decision making in the formal political sphere as well as conflicts between groups of people. Julia further explained that budgets are typical of the political and that political decisions on matters of health 'in a way decides people's fates' and might therefore become conflictual. Highlighting the conflictual in society, social scientist Peter reflected that 'there can be fierce identity conflicts or class conflicts in society. That are not part of the political sphere, but might become so eventually'. In this bottom-up approach to politics, Peter described how conflicts between people may develop and in turn be picked up in formal politics.

Although it did not emerge as a major aspect in the students' responses, some students specifically mentioned that issues on which people disagree are more political than issues on which people primarily agree. According to the students, this conflictuality is often made clear by the fact that politicians discuss the issue, which relates to the contextual nature of political issues (see section 4.4). However, students did give examples of the conflictual nature of politics, as seen from their point of view, as in student Jacob's discussion of Norway's oil drilling:

> I mean, oil, that has become rather political. The Green Party, or whatever they're called, wants to take away the oil. I'm not sure I'm talking about the right party here, but they want to take it away, and I'm not sure how long it will… [take to find alternatives]. But oil is really important for us right now and… […] even if it causes pollution, it would be better that we take something else out that is polluting… Oil, we really should keep going until it runs out, at least that's what I believe. (Jacob, student)

Even though Jacob was unsure about the political argument in national politics, he demonstrated that he saw a conflict that was political. These examples illustrate how issues that arise both in formal politics and in civil society can be seen as very political, as long as they have a conflictual dimension. Another student, Sara, linked political issues to feelings and noted that such feelings are connected to values and opinions:

> Politics, for me, is about feelings. That you have opinions that are strong. And that people can have different perspectives on that issue. Many issues, like refugees, create strong disagreements. Both sides often want to change things and make society better, but they want very different things. […] It is so charged because they have so many different opinions on different issues. And that's why it is so important to discuss and get different perspectives. (Sara, student)

Sara's perceptions of politics centred on strong opinions that were different. She also recognised that politicians may want the same thing – to make society better – but that the way forward can be very different. Both she and her fellow students often returned to the importance of getting different perspectives on controversial issues such as migration.

4.3 Contemporary

The contemporary nature of political issues was most clearly represented in the students' responses. All of the examples of political issues mentioned by the students were contemporary issues that were currently ongoing or were at the height of attention. Hannah, one of the academics, supported this take on political issues as contemporary and suggested that the role of the media in the communication between politicians and the people about such issues was under-researched by political scientists. She concluded that political issues are often 'in and out' of politics, depending on the attention they are given at specific contextual times:

> You have to look at societal context to understand political issues […] Take oil politics as one example, it was very politicised in the 1970s when Norway was building its petroleum industry, and then it became more and more depoliticised and then, when oil was connected to climate change, it was politicised again. That doesn't mean that it was uninteresting what happened in the in-between years… (Hannah, political science)

Max, a political scientist, reflected on the differences between history and political science as disciplines and concluded that political science is more contemporary, with a focus on normative questions:

> I guess that an important difference between a social scientist and a historian is that political science, for instance, deals with some kind of normative 'should question', I mean like 'how should we live?' or 'how should we organise society?' Those are quite basic questions, and the point of departure is how our societies are now, and I guess that is an important starting point – a problem we are facing now. Then, of course, we also ask questions on how we got here, too. (Max, political science)

Students further argued that issues that are political are discussed by politicians as well as in the news and on social media. Here, student Hugo reflected on the same topic mentioned by Hannah, that is, the issue of drilling for oil:

> Because when… The one party that wants to stop it, and then those who want it [oil drilling], they are going to discuss it. I think that is quite political right now. Plus, there is a lot about it in the media now, and that is really where we hear about everything. (Hugo, student)

Hugo described the issue of oil rigs in vulnerable areas as political because political parties opposed to or in favour of continued searches for oil discussed the issue, and the debates were frequently reported in national news media and on social media platforms. However, one student reflected upon how issues in our daily lives can become very political based on what is going on in society. When he talked about the differences between public and private issues, he realised that a private question, such as holiday, has become politicised due to the pandemic:

> I mean right now, with the pandemic, there are a lot of political things with an easy thing like going to the mountains for winter break. A year ago, that was not a thing, but now it is. About stopping the spread of covid… It becomes politics because of what is going on right now. (Jack, student)

Apart from being a contemporary issue, Jack perceived the pandemic as an issue related to the state of the society around him. In general, the students highlighted the role of politics in finding solutions to problems or challenges in society. More specifically, Emma and Robert discussed how issues become political when people require solutions. For example, when talking about the refugee crisis, Emma said, 'It's about human life; it's

quite important that we find some kind of solution for that right now.' Certain issues are made contemporarily important due to their urgency, which in turn is often related to their collective appeal (Section 4.1) and their conflictual nature (Section 4.2).

4.4 Contextual

Context was described as an important criterion by both students and academics. Further, the context contributing to an issue being perceived as political cuts across the aspects of collective, contemporary, and conflictual, as these three are often a result of contextual factors. The academics highlighted social and political contexts as the most important deciding factor in whether an issue is political or not. Christian, one of the academics, explained how types of actions can be seen as more or less political depending on the intention of the actor:

> I think it's sometimes hard to say that some issues are more political than others… […] it's all about the context, right? Simple things, like hanging a sign in a shop window, can be extremely political or just a trivial thing. Putting a flower in your buttonhole can also be a very political action, but it could also just be about aesthetics. (Christian, social scientist)

Nelly, a researcher in gender studies, turned to history to describe how important contextualisation is for understanding politics:

> I mean, the question of what is political or not is important to problematise. I don't think you can answer it since it varies over time […] I mean, like before we had democracy, people regarded labour as something private, and it didn't become public until the mid-1800s when regulations came into effect, like with work environments and stuff. […] Still, we have had political reforms regarding the most private things we can imagine, like sexuality and such – things that have been regulated throughout history, so there are obviously paradoxes here. And again, I guess it's an ideological question as well, what is public and what is private… (Nelly, gender studies)

In addition to more general descriptions of contextuality, 'intention' and 'politisation' were two relevant concepts. Christian continued to reflect that even non-intentional actions can be very political: 'I do not know the intention of the man who lit himself on fire in Tunisia, but starting a revolution across the entire Middle East, I hardly think that was his intention.' Referencing one of the pivotal moments of the Arab Spring, Christian exemplified how small actions in a specific context can have political ramifications. To Hannah, 'politisation' is the way various issues can be regarded as very political at one point in time or in one context and non-political in another. She operationalised 'politisation' as the extent to which an issue is the object of political debate and media attention (see Section 4.3). She explained that an issue can either be highly political for a couple of months and then become depoliticised, or it can lie just beneath the surface over

a long period of time and frequently bob to the surface to become politicised and, again, a part of the public debate.

When students talked about politics, they often tried to distinguish between what is political and not by using the personal sphere as a contrast to the political sphere. Many times, they realised that issues were more political than they first thought, as in this example from the student Lina:

> Of course, there are personal things as well. The things that happen at home and that shouldn't be influenced by politics… I mean, things that are in your household should be decided [by you]. Ok, you're not allowed to hit your kids, but perhaps there should be some parts that should not be political… […] I think that most things are political, or at least influenced by politics. (Lina, student)

In this excerpt, Lina started talking about the private sphere but realised that 'personal things' can also be linked to politics and thus showed an understanding that even private matters can be political. Another student, Anna, also turned to family issues to distinguish between private and public, but realised that context determines whether the example is private or not:

> I mean, some things are really less political, such as who will leave the children at the kindergarten every day, but still… who should have the opportunity to be on parental leave and be able to leave the kids at kindergarten. I mean, that's more political. (Anna, student)

Another student, Jack, remarked that issues that are not political in Scandinavia might be so in other places, stating, 'I mean human rights shouldn't be a political issue, but it is. Here, we take it for granted, but it is very political somewhere else.' For students in general, however, the everyday understanding was conceptualised by talking about 'big' and 'important' issues as the most political ones. For them, context seemed to be about contrasting different sets of issues: the then-ongoing refugee crisis versus whether or not students should get free fruit in school or the environmental crisis contrasted with the debate over whether or not students should have homework. In the words of the student, Emma: 'Human life. Fruit. I would absolutely say that it is possible to talk about the degree of importance'. Students mentioned the environment, refugees and the pandemic, all of which cut straight to the core of several of the characteristics of political issues given by the interviewees. Specifically, they affect many people's lives and many people have involved themselves (collective); people and politicians disagree on how to handle them (conflictual); and, not least, solutions are needed (contemporary).

5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

Encountering and trying to make sense of politics is, not surprisingly, very different for experts and novices in the social sciences. Academics involved in the field of political studies are equipped with conceptual and procedural understandings of what constitutes

political issues. One such example is the blurred line between public and personal issues and how they are addressed in societal discourse. By using different approaches derived from theory and research (e.g., gender and deliberative approaches), academics can shift their viewpoint to understand issues from different perspectives. As such, academics are rooted and wired into the epistemic communities of their scientific disciplines (see Young, 2013) and thus see internal significance through epistemic principles. Conversely, students are more clearly rooted in an 'everyday understanding' of politics – being occupied with questions they find relevant for their contemporary life. At the same time, students' perceptions are also influenced by their education as illustrated, for example, by their use of social science terminology. We uncovered differences in how students and academics identified and reflected on political issues. For example, the blurred line between public and private seemed to be somewhat confusing for the students in this study, and they emphasised the contemporaneity of political issues more strongly than the academics. However, we also identified mutual ways of approaching and understanding the political between students and academics.

In our findings, we presented four mutual aspects in students' and social science academics' perspectives on political issues. These four aspects were 1) collective, 2) contemporary, 3) conflictual, and 4) contextual. As illustrated in the findings, both students and academics addressed several aspects of politics and the political that have been important in political theory (e.g., Heywood, 2007; Mouffe, 2005). Students, in particular, used the notion of the public versus private sphere to reflect on political issues. However, when talking about family life, several students noted how it is hard to separate the two spheres completely, as the political influences many aspects of personal life (Bryson, 2016; Zerilli, 2006). Moreover, they supplemented disciplinary perspectives with considerations stemming from the lifeworld, for example, by offering specific examples of current or familiar issues to illustrate their points. Importantly, we found that both students and academics relied on disciplinary and lifeworld perspectives in their responses. Although academics had an expert gaze, they often returned to the importance of politics outside the internal significance within the epistemic community, such as Martha's worry that the disciplines drain politics of its blood. Consequently, the four aspects also incorporate both lifeworld and disciplinary approaches, allowing them to meet. Our argument is that these four aspects can be used to target politics in the political classroom and offer a gateway into the disciplinary world through students' experiences, allowing them to encounter new ways of understanding and analysing politics through interpretation and enabling them to orient themselves in political issues inside and outside of the classroom.

Listening to young people reflect upon politics makes it obvious that they find it important and that they have relevant experiences that they bring with them into the classroom. These experiences (and emotions) are important, particularly if we want social science education to be in line with students' more differentiated views of politics (Mathé, 2017; Flanagan, 2013; Kahne et al., 2013; Sloam, 2007, 2014; Tonge, 2009; Zukin et al., 2006).

Students' understandings of politics are not primarily focused on the administrative and organisational aspects, but on the lively features where societal issues are engaged and debated. These experiences are important and serve as gateways to new experiences beyond everyday understandings. These experiences can also be offered in the classroom, where teachers (and students) bring new examples and sources that can be used to discuss political issues. The conceptual world of social science and procedural tools used to interpret politics can serve as important qualifications for students' understanding and conceptualisation of the political. One such example is the use of social scientific theory to allow students to understand politics in new ways (cf. Sandahl, 2015).

The four guiding aspects of collective, contemporary, conflictual and contextual all allow disciplinary qualification of what the political can be. As students engage in conceptualisation and interpretation of societal issues, new understandings will emerge. Students can in turn use this understanding to orient themselves in political issues within and beyond the classroom; as such, the understanding can be returned to the lifeworld. Consequently, we argue that the four thematic aspects presented in this article can serve as a supplement to shift focus from formal or traditional definitions of politics that often dominate social science education (Børhaug, 2008; Carr, 2008; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004) and can be used in teaching to relate students' lifeworlds to the disciplinary world in social science education.

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