This item is the archived peer-reviewed author-version of:

Capturing in words what a symbol symbolizes? Challenges for studying symbolic representation from a discursive approach

Reference:

Lombardo Emanuela, Meier Petra.- Capturing in words what a symbol symbolizes? Challenges for studying symbolic representation from a discursive approach
Politics, groups, and identities - ISSN 2156-5503 - 5:3(2017), p. 482-487
Full text (Publisher's DOI): <https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2017.1321994>
To cite this reference: <https://hdl.handle.net/10067/1431700151162165141>

Symbolic representation was defined by Pitkin (1967) as the representation of a group, nation or state (the principal) through an object such as a flag (the agent) which ‘stands for’ that principal and to which a certain representative meaning is attributed. In our study of the symbolic representation of gender the agent is discourse, more specifically political discourse (Lombardo and Meier 2014). This discursive approach has allowed us to study symbolic representation as a dimension of representation *per se*, and to unpack the relation between the agent and the principal in symbolic representation by revealing the activity of constructing meanings and ascribing them to the principal. Yet, a number of questions arise: what makes a symbol a symbol and what does this mean for a discursive approach to symbols? What makes symbolic representation different from substantive representation when the agent is of a discursive nature? And what methodological challenges does the study of discourse as the agent of symbolic representation include? This contribution focuses on conceptual challenges as our main concern when studying symbolic representation was the need to define it as a dimension *per se*.

Symbolic representation as a dimension of representation *per se*

Symbolic representation is often conceptualized as a derived product of descriptive representation, ‘what do we get at the level of symbolic representation once we have descriptive representation?’. We think instead that symbolic representation is a dimension of representation *per se*, not to be subordinated to either descriptive or substantive representation, and that it contributes to the understanding of representative politics as the other two dimensions do. Starting from Pitkin’s (1967) definition means considering that symbolic representation is more than a simple effect of descriptive representation at a symbolic level. Symbols stand for a principal. Consequently, they impact upon the principal. Therefore, the agent in symbolic representation does far more than simply ‘stand for’ a principal. Through what the symbol embodies and evokes, it not only represents but *presents* the principal in a particular way. For instance, if currency is a symbolic agent of the nation, the predominance of male rather than female characters on banknotes presents the nation as one in which women have done little that is worth remembering. We argue that what symbolic agents do when standing for principals is to *construct* meanings and norms that present the principal in specific ways.

What is the agent then? Symbols tend to be objects such as flags, buildings, statues, images. In our study we start from the analysis of symbolic representation through discursive agents, such as laws, policy plans, or parliamentary debates (Lombardo and Meier 2014). We consider discursive agents for two main reasons. Firstly, they are helpful to capture and make explicit the – otherwise invisible – meanings and norms that symbols suggest or evoke. In our case, we were interested in gendered meanings. We see these at – at least – two levels. Men and women can be discursively constructed, thus gendering them as principals in a particular way. But discursive constructions of men and women also gender another principal, such as a certain institution or policy. By discursively constructing women and men in particular ways and by using these constructions to ascribe meaning beyond women and men, discourses reflect an underlying conceptualisation of gender.

In representing the principal, the agent in symbolic representation attaches meanings, norms, values, and beliefs to the principal. To express it in the language of Goffmann, by framing the principal in a particular way, for example male politicians with defence and female politicians with care policies, the agent renders ‘what would otherwise be a meaningless aspect of the scene into something that is meaningful’ (Goffmann 1974, 21). The principal is thus associated or identified with this meaning, making it difficult to change people’s association of men with defence and women with care, but also of conceptualizing defence differently from how it has traditionally been done. A discursive approach to the analysis of symbolic representation then not only helps to show that the meanings and norms attributed to the principal are constructed and not inherent to the principal. It also shows that: (i) the understanding of the meaning of symbols depends on the ‘schemata of interpretation’ or frames that social groups construct and which we are often unaware of (Goffmann 1974, 21); and (ii) meanings associated with a particular principal open up or close opportunities for the principal, thereby facilitating processes of domination and marginalisation.

Secondly, we consider discursive agents because the meanings of symbols are continuously contested in discursive processes, and through contestation new meanings can be attached to symbols, for instance when it comes to change traditional constructions of women, men, or families (Ferree 2012). For example, the debate that rose in 2008 when the seven-month pregnant Spanish politician Carme Chacón was appointed minister of defence revealed different interpretations of this gendered symbol. Feminist actors saw the relevance of the symbol in that it showed that women ‘can be

and are everywhere', even in the most male-dominated political areas (Abend 2008). By contrast, actors with traditional gender perspectives expressed scepticism about the capacity of a mother-to-be minister to manage the portfolio of defence (García 2008). A discursive approach is thus helpful in detecting and analysing such shifts of meaning and changes in processes of domination and marginalisation.

Conceptual challenges in the discursive study of symbolic representation

While taking a discursive approach has improved our understanding of symbolic representation, we faced two main conceptual challenges. Firstly, what makes a symbol a symbol? Secondly, what makes symbolic representation different from substantive representation when the agent is of a discursive nature? The question 'what makes a symbol a symbol?' seems to arise less when it comes to visual agents of symbolic representation. Public opinion tends to more immediately recognize them, though the feelings and attitudes towards the principal this agent stands for might vary. For instance, public opinion tends to recognize the European Union (EU) when seeing golden or yellow stars on a blue background, though the appreciation of this institution and its project will not be the same for everybody. But what makes a symbol a symbol in the case of a discursive agent? Is it the word itself, its literal meaning? In most cases this might not be sufficient. It is rather the whole discursive construction in combination with the associations this evokes.

But will this discursive symbolic construction be as recognisable as other agents of symbolic representation? This is most likely not the case. A number of discursive agents do have the same strength as other symbols. This is for instance the case with national devices as the *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity* motto, which functions in similar evocative ways as the EU golden and blue colours because people socialized in European history have long been trained to associate it with France. This might not be the case, though, when speaking of the 'caring parent', a gender neutral construction of the care provider. Many will still assume this is a woman, some because they are convinced that this is a women's role, others because they never thought about who should provide for care. The associations here might not only differ as discussed for the case of the European symbol, where the only difference was in people's value judgment of the object. The very symbol might not necessarily be recognised as such in the care example. Imagine now the discursive construction of a 'caring parent' to be used in a policy brief in combination with 'she'. Only those thinking beyond the traditional heterosexual couple

of parents and/or who are in favour of a balanced sharing of care between both sexes, realise that such a combination of discursive constructions undermines gender equality. Due to the gendered socialization of roles, others will consider this discursive construction to be perfectly normal because, for them, women are (or should be) the care providers.

When some people do not even see a specific discursive construction as a symbol, what then makes a symbol a symbol? The fact that at least one social group identifies it as such. This can be detected through the study of parliamentary debates by analysing, for instance, the recurrent association of women with care in the discourse of parliamentary groups, or through interviews or surveys that inquire about female and male politicians' competencies about defence policy. In the former example, those who are in favour of equal sharing of care between the sexes would identify the apparently gender-neutral policy briefing as a symbol of gender inequality. In the second example, those who share more traditional views about gender roles, would probably identify men as more competent in dealing with issues of defence. The reason why the groups of people in these examples can identify something as a symbol is because they make use of frames suggesting associations of specific meanings with that symbol. Thus, the recognition and interpretation of symbols and their meanings vary depending on the different social groups we are socialised into. To understand why something is a symbol for some people 'ultimately one must look to frames' (Goffmann 1974, 569). It is precisely because of the importance of framing for social interpretation that the impact of discursive symbolic representation should not be underestimated.

The second conceptual challenge we face when the agent is of a discursive nature is how to distinguish symbolic from substantive representation. Substantive representation focuses on the representing act(ivity) itself, on what the agent does to represent the needs and interests of the principal. A typical agent-principal relation in this case is that between an elected member of parliament and her or his constituency. Acting on behalf of the principal mainly means making claims on behalf of the principal, speaking in their name, articulating their interests and needs. Whether orally, such as in parliamentary interventions, or in writing, when submitting a bill, substantive representation to a large extent materializes through discursive constructions. What then makes it different from symbolic representation whenever the symbol is discourse?

According to us, the main difference between substantive and symbolic representation lies in the degree of intentionality involved. In substantive representation the agent's

act(ivity) represents the principal. A Member of Parliament (MP) may argue for the need of reconciliation measures so as to facilitate the combination of paid work and care provided for in the private sphere. Presenting this as a measure women need involves a representation of women as the primary care providers and labels care work as feminine. This might or not suit this MP's constituency, but it is an intentional act of substantive representation. The MP might not be aware of the way in which he or she genders reconciliation and thereby assigns different roles and tasks to men and women, but it is nonetheless an intentional act of substantive representation.

However, the unintentionally gendered representation of reconciliation falls under symbolic representation. The socially constructed gender norms that underlie the MP's speech were not intentional, but rather the result of a pre-existing context of values, assumptions, and meanings that symbolic representation studies. This prevailing normative context tends to symbolically associate women with care and therefore to unconsciously attach women meanings that make them more fit for care than men. We would speak of substantive representation if this gendered representation were intentional¹. But when the agent is of a discursive nature, symbolic representation often does not contain the same degree of intentionality, at least not when an agent is speaking on behalf of his or her constituency. While in the end the result may be the same, analytically speaking substantive and symbolic representation differ from each other, because they place the focus on different aspects of political representation: the act of representation and the norms underlying this act. For example, in a parliamentary debate in which an MP intentionally speaks of the 'caring parent' defined in gender-neutral terms so to avoid stereotypes about the traditional caring role of women, s/he cannot avoid the audience's symbolic association of the 'caring parent' with a woman. Despite the MP's gender equal intentions, the concept of the 'caring parent' is likely to evoke norms about traditional gender roles constructed prior to the MP's representative act.

Methodological challenges in the discursive study of symbolic representation

In the previous sections we have made the case for a discursive approach to studying symbolic representation without stretching the concept. Such a study, nonetheless,

¹ This does not imply that symbolic representation is never intentional. Many objects fulfilling the role of an agent standing for a principal have been chosen because of what they evoke.

entails a number of methodological challenges. The main question is how to grasp the discursive agent. Taking discourse as the symbol allowed us to examine the construction of meanings that are attached to the principal through the agent. We employed Critical Frame Analysis, a qualitative method studying policy frames by identifying the different dimensions in which policy problems and solutions are represented (Verloo 2007). Critical Frame Analysis proved useful because it allowed us to grasp the different symbolic representations found in political discourses by making explicit the ways in which policy issues are framed and the norms and values that underlie them.

The main challenge was to tie back the analysis of meanings of gender that emerged in policy texts to the concept of representation. For example, the frame analysis of policy documents revealed the discursive construction of men mostly as symbols of the public sphere (labour and politics) and of women mostly as symbols of the private sphere (domestic and reproductive activities). Through this construction, we argued, people's feelings and habits towards female and male politicians are trained, so that men are more easily symbolically associated with politics than women. Yet, a direct link between this discursive construction and gender representation cannot be established because the construction of gendered norms and meanings that trains people's habits is a long-term process that has been taking place prior to the act of representation and in a variety of social arenas. How can we link the unequal gender norms found in policy discourses that symbolically associate men with politics more legitimately than women with other inequalities in politics, such as vertical segregation or the marginalisation of equality issues on the agenda?

Research should develop methods to operationalize such links in the relation between an agent and a principal on a discursive basis. Such methods might require participant observations and interviews aimed at connecting the gender norms constructed in specific policy discourses with political practices and reactions to gendered discourses. Goffmann's ethnographic observation of everyday social interactions could be a source of inspiration, if applied, for example to the observation of parliamentary debates and political meetings followed by interviews of female and male politicians about the gender norms and discourses displayed in these acts.

Conclusions

The vague character of symbolic representation has contributed to its being under researched by gender and politics scholars, and has produced interpretations of this dimension mostly from the perspective of descriptive representation. However, the study of symbolic representation as a dimension *per se* is important for making explicit the less visible norms and meanings that are constructed in processes of representation and which have consequences for the principal. Research should develop specific methodologies for analysing symbolic representation as a dimension *per se*, through discursive or other approaches, and for empirically studying it in relation with descriptive and substantive representation.

References

- Abend, Lisa. 2008. "Spain's Pregnant Defense Minister." *Time World*, April 15.
<http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1730927,00.html>
- Ferree, Myra M. 2012. *Varieties of Feminism. German Gender Politics in Global Perspective*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- García, Amaya. 2008. "El 'Otro' Reto de Carme Chacón." *El Mundo*, April 14.
<http://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2008/04/14/espana/1208172862.html>
- Goffmann, Erving. 1974. *Frame Analysis. An Essay on the Organisation of Experience*. Harmondsworth: Peregrine Books.
- Lombardo, Emanuela, and Petra Meier. 2014. *The Symbolic Representation of Gender. A Discursive Approach*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Pitkin, Hanna F. 1967. *The Concept of Representation*. California: University of California Press.
- Verloo, Mieke, ed. 2007. *Multiple Meanings of Gender Equality: A Critical Frame Analysis of Gender Policies in Europe*. Budapest: CEU Press.