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'How Much Politics Is There'? Exploring Students' Experiences of Values and Impartiality from an Epistemic Perspective

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we report findings of students' conceptions of values and impartiality in political science teaching in relation to research on epistemic beliefs. This field of research concerns students' beliefs about the nature of knowledge in different disciplines; beliefs that are central to learning disciplinary knowledge. Interviews were conducted with students after one semester of political science education, focusing on their experiences of values in teaching. Results show that students give contradicting answers regarding values and impartiality in political science teaching. They oscillate between different epistemic beliefs and they have an unclear understanding of the nature of knowledge in the discipline. Questions on the nature and limits of knowledge, therefore, need to be prioritized in political science education. If students are to become literate within their field, they need to become aware of the multiple epistemological underpinnings inherent in the discipline, and the ways these influence the discipline.

Introduction

In a review of research on teaching and learning political science education, Craig (2014) concludes that there is a "new commitment" to questions of teaching and learning within the political science discipline. However, until now this interest has primarily generated an increased focus on outcomes of different pedagogical interventions, leaving questions regarding students' learning processes unattended (Craig 2014, 33). Craig calls for a more genuine intersection of political science and learning, and in our research, we focus on learning and learning challenges that are particularly relevant to political science education. We have investigated two dimensions that may affect students' learning negatively: the influence of every day thinking on political science students' understanding of core concepts (Ekström and Lundholm, 2018) and students' conceptions of the nature of knowledge and knowledge production in the discipline. The latter is the focus of this article, and we report findings of students' conceptions of values and impartiality in political science teaching in relation to research on epistemic beliefs, a psychological perspective on the philosophy of knowledge – the nature of knowledge

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and knowing (Hofer and Pintrich 1997). This field of research concerns students' beliefs about the nature of knowledge—in general and in various disciplines—and how such beliefs may influence learning and conceptual change.

The importance of focusing on students' understandings of knowledge and knowledge production is highlighted by the fact that such an understanding is central to learning disciplinary knowledge (cf. Edmondson and Novak 1993; Maggioni, Fox, and Alexander 2010). If students are to become literate within their field, they need to become aware of the multiple epistemological underpinnings inherent in the discipline (cf. Bates and Jenkins 2007; Marsh and Stoker 2010), and the ways these influence the discipline (Badersten 2014). This multiplicity of epistemological underpinnings in political science is related to the fact that the discipline comprises both normative and empirical dimensions (Gerring and Yesnowitz, 2006). Further, political science comprises core theories with conflicting epistemologies, and finally, political science students are themselves "political animals" who often chose to study political science because of their political and ideological opinions (Badersten 2014). This raise questions such as: What is knowledge and what is an opinion? On what topics can we reach objective knowledge? How can we compare theories with conflicting views of what knowledge is all about? The importance of focusing on political science students' understandings of knowledge and knowledge production is due to lack of research in this area, and thus, how students experience conflicting epistemologies, what challenges this poses, and, how it potentially affects learning, is important. When epistemological issues have been discussed, it has generally been done in relation to fear of a biased education that, for example, only allows certain perspectives to serve as "truths" (Dey 1996; Horowitz 2007; LaFalce and Gomez 2007; Peters and Droddy 2003) or that education is not able to cultivate the right kind of knowledge, a political knowledge that may shape the political values and standpoints of the students in a preferable way (Hildreth 2006; Kelly-Woessner and Woessner 2008; Latimer and Hempsen 2012; Martin, Tankersley and Ye 2012). We wish to add to this literature a broader focus on students' understanding of knowledge and knowledge production in the discipline and to explore if they see the nature of knowledge in the discipline as something problematic and if so, how they deal with these problems.

In this study, we investigate students' views on values and impartiality in political science teaching and classroom dialogs. That is, we are interested in knowing how students view teaching practices that actualize issues with a value dimension, such as equality reforms or environmental reforms. Do students think that these issues have a legitimate place within the political science classroom, and if so, how do they think that teachers should approach these issues? We have chosen to focus on values and impartiality as these are aspects closely connected to issues of the nature of knowledge in the discipline, but at the same time are more "hands on" and accessible to students than more theoretical discussions about epistemic beliefs. Thus, we believe students' views on values and impartiality are relevant to consider as part of their epistemological beliefs.

Previous research

Students' experiences of values in the discipline

Values is part of science and scientific endeavor in the sense that not all research topics are seen as important, and some will be more privileged and in focus. Lundholm (2018)

describes this as part of a meta level of all disciplines, which might be made more or less explicit in teaching. Already in 1944, Felix Kaufmann (1944) described controversy relating to values as the greatest methodological problem found in all social sciences, however there is still little research on students' experiences of values, viewpoints and impartiality in political science (LaFalce and Gomez 2007). As stated earlier, there has generally been a focus on studies that analyze how teaching and learning in political science may shape students' political values and standpoints (Hildreth 2006; Kelly-Woessner and Woessner 2008; Latimer and Hempsen 2012; Martin, Tankersley and Ye 2012; Smith 2012). The debate concerning these issues is livelier when it comes to secondary education, and questions of hidden or unhidden normativity in relation to social science education or history education are being intensively researched (Moré and Aldenmyr 2015; Olson and Zimenkova 2015; Potapova 2015). The debate points both to the question of whether social science education should aim to establish some common normative goals, and to the question of which normative goals should be privileged (Hedtke and Grammes 2016).

Research has however been conducted in other domains of higher education where, similar to political science, content, or the discipline itself is likely to evoke students' values. For example, research on learning in ecology, economics, environmental, and geography education report empirical findings on how values are perceived by students (Lundholm and Davies 2013; Lundholm, Hopwood and Rickinson 2013; Rickinson, Lundholm and Hopwood 2009). First, students may perceive the subject of geography to be "an opinion subject", and therefore, students share their personal views on various matters (Rickinson, Lundholm, and Hopwood 2009). On the other hand, students in environmental studies struggle with the notion, and aim, of "being objective" and keep personal values and viewpoints aside when solving an assignment on environmental management reports (ibid, 56). Second, engineering students in ecology found implicit value stances communicated in class by the teacher highly provoking. In addition they did not think it was appropriate to engage in argumentation with the teacher on solutions to environmental problems, which they perceived as politicized (ibid, 58). Finally, in the context of economics education, students find "economics thinking" of the discipline to be biased as environmental and ecological aspects relating to economics are being excluded, which they find provoking as they relate this to their values on the importance of nature (ibid, 53).

We note a lack of studies on how students experience values in political science, what possible challenges it poses, and how it could potentially affect learning. As mentioned, research has studied values and normative questions as a potential problem, i.e. something that may create a biased education (Dey 1996; Horowitz 2007; LaFalce and Gomez 2007; Peters and Droddy 2003) or as a potential outcome of teaching and learning in political science where political science teaching may shape the political values and standpoints of the students (Hildreth 2006; Kelly-Woessner and Woessner 2008; Latimer and Hempsen 2012; Martin, Tankersley and Ye 2012; Smith 2012). However, Lundholm (2018) concludes, "Learning in the social sciences has two inherent components; both the value dimension of the discipline, and the values and emotions that students hold", which makes values particularly challenging and relevant to consider in relation to political science education.

In this study, we are interested in students' understandings of values as an important part of students' discipline-specific patterns of epistemic beliefs, and we concur with the idea that students' epistemic beliefs matter if we are to enhance learning (cf. Edmondson and Novak 1993; Hofer 2001; Maggioni, Fox, and Alexander 2010; VanSledright and Maggioni 2016). To understand how students make sense of, for example, conflicting epistemological and normative stances, and how teachers may help students to more nuanced and consistent coordination of these beliefs, have shown to been associated with learning in other domains. Previous research has also showed that these processes, at least to some extent, are domain specific, and that there are disciplinary differences when it comes to, for example, university students' beliefs about the certainty of knowledge (Hofer 2000).

In relation to the social sciences more broadly, Maggioni, Fox, and Alexander (2010) discuss issues of how competence in social science is connected to a range of specific epistemic underpinnings such as the ability to critically evaluate different knowledge sources. However, the study focuses mainly on history classes at secondary level, and the authors invite social scientists to contribute to a better understanding of domain-general versus domain-specific aspects of epistemological beliefs among the range of social science disciplines. This study may be seen as a contribution to such a call, as well as to the call for research on the scholarship of teaching and learning in political science.

Here, we focus on ways that students perceive values in the discipline, and values represented or presented by their teachers. In relation to such a focus, we consider an interest in students' epistemic beliefs—defined here as beliefs about the nature and acquisition of knowledge (Depaepe, De Corte, and Verschaffel 2016, 126)—to be a fruitful theoretical viewpoint. Theories on the importance of competing views of what constitutes disciplinary knowledge and how such knowledge may be acquired may shed light on whether students see values as a threat toward objective knowledge in political science, or whether values are seen as a natural component of interpretivism and disciplinary knowledge.

Theoretical framework

Epistemic beliefs

The first *Handbook of Research on Epistemic Cognition* by Greene and colleagues was published in 2016, and conceptual change research has come to include research on epistemic cognition for some time. Research on epistemic cognition originates in the work by Perry (1968) and an overview of research in this area was first presented by Hofer and Pintrich (1997). In our research on conceptual change in political science, we conclude on the strong influence of students' every day understanding and challenges for teaching, but also found that students' values influence their ability to engage with the normative theories in the discipline (Ekström and Lundholm 2018).

From a general perspective, theory on epistemic beliefs takes an interest in students' beliefs about knowledge and the nature of the subject they are thought (Greene, Sandoval, and Bråten 2016, 8). Focus is on "how individuals come to know, the theories and beliefs they hold about knowing, and the manner in which such epistemological premises are a part of and an influence on the cognitive processes of thinking and reasoning" (Hofer 2000). Hence,

students' understandings of the nature of knowledge (what knowledge is), and beliefs about the process of knowing (how knowledge is produced) is of interest. Hofer (2000) operationalized these aspects into four dimensions that together capture the way students look upon knowledge and knowledge production:

Certainty of knowledge

This dimension concerns the degree of fixation or stability of knowledge, that is, if knowledge is seen as absolute and stable or something that may change over time.

Simplicity of knowledge

This dimension concerns knowledge as set of concrete, knowable facts, or as something that is uncertain, contextual, and contingent.

Source of knowledge

This dimension concerns what is seen as legitimate knowledge and producer or mediator of knowledge, for example, if knowledge only originates in an external authority, or if knowledge may be co-constructed among peers.

Justification of knowledge

This dimension concerns validation of knowledge and what is seen as legitimate validation, for example, whether knowledge needs to be tested scientifically or if a "gut feeling" may count as a legitimate for justifying a truth claim.

In general, the literature of epistemic cognition has labeled some of these beliefs about knowledge as more mature or developed. Beliefs where knowledge is seen as something evolving and to a certain degree subjective, has been seen as mature and productive for learning. However, some studies have problematized this view and have shown that beliefs about knowledge also is connected to contexts such as different disciplines (Aditomo 2018; Chinn, Buckland, and Samarapungavan 2011; Elby and Hammer 2001). According to these studies, it is, for example, important to take into consideration whether a discipline recognizes a common paradigm (such as the hard disciplines), or if there are multiple competing paradigms in a discipline (such as the soft disciplines). The underlying epistemology of the discipline may, therefore, be reflected in both teaching practices and students' learning dilemmas. Below we will discuss how specificities of the political science discipline might come into play when it comes to disciplinary understandings of knowledge.

Multiple epistemologies and the discipline of political science

As previously stated, studies on students' epistemic beliefs relating to political science are lacking, but studies have been conducted in other domains. VanSledright and Maggioni (2016) show how the notion of "objectivity" in history is particularly troublesome for students, and describe this potential learning dilemma against the backdrop of a broader epistemological debate within the history discipline. Until the late 60s the objectivist epistemological tradition held dominance in history but since then more

relativistic views are prevalent. This has caused confusion about, for example, whether there is an objective past that we can gain knowledge of. From a more relativistic stand-point it has been claimed that objects and accounts hold no meaning other than what an interpreter gives them. Within history teaching, describing, and defining the nature of the interpretative process of the past, and discussing validity of a range of interpret-ative criteria, is therefore, a crucial and challenging element (VanSledright and Maggioni 2016, 116).

These discussions of epistemology are relevant to political science teaching. In accordance with the epistemological development in history, the political science discip-line has experienced an epistemological shift or development (cf. Berry 1991). The philosophical underpinnings of the logical positivism that inspired, for example, the behavioralists within the political science field have been challenged by a range of inter-pretative approaches that share more anti-foundational underpinnings (see discussion in Marsh and Stoker 2010). This shift has left the discipline with a broad range of legitim-ate epistemological stances (cf. List and Valentini 2016; Marsh and Stoker 2010) and potential epistemological tension.

This tension also influences and confuses views on values in the discipline. Political science should in accordance with the objectivist stance be a scientific discipline where values have no place, while the interpretivist stance claims that knowledge representa-tions within political science always must be seen as "interpretative" (cf. Marsh and Stoker 2010). Such a standpoint implies that there is no possibility of a "detached observer" who objectively analyses empirical findings but perspectives, viewpoints and values influence the analyst in the analytical process. So, while the former position states that values may be suppressed, the latter states that values are an inherent part of the discipline.

This duality concerning epistemology may also be seen in relation to other dimen-sions of the discipline. Political science has, for example, always had an inherent dividing line between normative and empirical political science (Gerring and Yesnowitz 2006). In general, the empirical approach seeks to discover and describe facts whereas the normative approach seeks to determine and prescribe values. The former approach is interested in making empirical statements concerning what "is" whereas the later approach is interested in what "should be" (Gerring and Yesnowitz 2006, 103). The discipline focuses on empirical issues such as how parliamentarism works in different countries as well as normative issues such as what is a just soci-ety. This divide is also connected to epistemology and different forms of knowledge: empirical statement is concerned with a situation which can be observed, while nor-mative statements are not capable of being discovered, described or verified by experience. Different kinds of knowledge with distinct truth-status are thus prevalent. This may create problems for the students; Is political science "real science" or is it only a matter of opinions? How can one evaluate different opinions and are all opinions equally valid? The questions relate to central dimensions of epistemic cog-nition such as the certainty of knowledge, the source of knowledge and the justifica-tion of knowledge (Mason 2016), and research shows that understanding these issues are central to learning disciplinary knowledge (cf. Edmondson and Novak 1993; Maggioni, Fox, and Alexander 2010).

Connected to the previous discussion on the dividing line between empirical and normative political science is the discussion of the scientific status of the discipline and the dividing line between conducting politics and studying politics. Some critics have pointed to the fact that political scientists are promoting a political rather than scholarly agenda (Horowitz 2007), while others have concluded that the study of politics cannot be totally apolitical and value-neutral. Proponents of the latter view point to the fact that, for example, choice of research topics inevitably will reflect the researcher's own political and moral priorities, and that the impact of such political influence must be openly acknowledged.

To conclude, there are tensions and various views regarding the possibility of certain knowledge in the discipline, that is, knowledge that has not been clouded by ideology, nested together with normative questions or bound up with the interpreter of the empirical finding. The epistemology—or theory of knowledge—of the discipline is, therefore, not totally fixed (Bates and Jenkins 2007; Badersten 2014; Marsh and Stoker 2010) and positivist and postmodern perspectives coexist and are used to analyze the same empirical field. This could complicate students' efforts to grasp a disciplinary view on what constitutes knowledge in the discipline, and if students do not unpack the different epistemological standpoints they may never fully understand or use the perspectives properly (Bates and Jenkins 2007). In turn, if students do not fully understand the perspectives they will not be able to analyze phenomenon and events from different perspectives, which is deeply problematic since being able to analyze phenomenon and events from different perspectives is really what being a political scientist is all about (Badersten 2014).

In summary, epistemological issues seem highly present in teaching and learning political science, and it is, therefore, important to investigate how this may create challenges and how teachers may approach them.

Research questions

In this article, we address the following research questions;

- What are students' conceptions of values and impartiality in the discipline of political science, how do they deal with these aspects, and, what are their suggestions for teaching with regards to values and impartiality?
- What dimensions of epistemic beliefs exists concerning students' conceptions of values and impartiality?

Method and material

In January 2015, at the end of their first semester, students enrolled in political science education at [Institution Redacted] took part in a survey, which focused upon students' political knowledge, values, and attitudes to various environmental policy instruments in relation to climate change. This was a post-semester survey and compared students' responses with a pre-semester survey.

One hundred and three students completed the questionnaire, and 38 stated that they could volunteer for an interview. Out of these 38 students, we selected a sample of students that demonstrated different levels of political knowledge according to their answers in the questionnaire. We hereby wanted to achieve a diversity in students' epistemological positions, since epistemological positions might be connected to knowledge (Aditomo 2018; Hofer 2000; Muis 2004. These students were contacted by e-mail and 13 students agreed to an interview. Both sexes were appropriately represented in the sample.[1]

Interviews were conducted focusing first on conceptual understanding (Ekström and Lundholm 2018) and second on their experiences of values in political science teaching. The choice of using interviews to analyze students' epistemic beliefs are motivated by the previously discussed contextuality of epistemic beliefs (Chinn, Buckland, and Samarapungavan 2011; Elby and Hammer 2001; Hammer and Elby 2002). Since epistemic beliefs are not stable across contexts, interviews are seen as a way of probing students' context dependent stances toward knowledge: "Interviews have a better chance of uncovering the contextual dependencies—and hence, the true sophistication—of students' beliefs about knowledge" (Elby and Hammer 2001, 556).

During the interview, the students were asked to first reflect upon if they experienced the existence of values in teaching and discussions on environmental issues, and to then think-aloud and share their views on values and ideologies broadly in political science education (c.f. Bernstein 2010). To exemplify, students were, for example, asked whether teachers had revealed their personal standpoints regarding the effectiveness of different environmental policies (e.g. taxes, legislation, and emission rights) and how the students had experienced such a statement.

The goal was to achieve a detailed description of students' reasoning; what made them come to a certain conclusion regarding the existence of values? Were there problems or dilemmas concerning these values? The interviews were open-ended and conversational (Kvale 1996, 19), and were taped and transcribed. The transcriptions were analyzed thematically (Braun and Clarke 2006). This means that the researchers searched for recurrent ways of making sense of the potential conflict between a preferred "scientific objectivity" and the inherent existence of values. Based on this repetition across the corpus, a number of subthemes, or nodes, emerged ("objectivity", "fear of indoctrination", "the importance of critical thinking") which have been analyzed with NVivo software. These nodes were the building blocks of the broader themes presented in the section below (e.g. "the need for an objective education that allows students to develop important academic skills such as critical thinking").

Epistemic beliefs concerning what knowledge is and how knowledge is produced (Hofer 2000), was part of the analysis in a seconds phase and in line with what Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006) call a "hybrid approach of inductive and deductive coding and theme development", we have been more abductive in our coding than otherwise stated by Braun and Clarke (2006). This means that we in the second phase of analysis privileged and highlighted themes that connected to dimensions of certainty of knowledge, simplicity of knowledge, source of knowledge, and justification of knowledge (see above, Hofer 2000).

In the results section, a number refers to a student, i.e., Student 1 is labeled (S1).

Results

We first describe the ways students look upon their political science teaching and in what ways they have experienced inappropriate pressure or influence regarding their teachers. Later, we discuss their views concerning the role of values in political science education, and in what ways these values could, and should, be left out of the political science classroom.

Multiple perspectives being discussed – no need for fear of indoctrination

In general, students do not see the existence of values in the classroom as an imminent risk in. In line with the findings of Losco and DeOllos (2007) and LaFalce and Gomez (2007), they do not experience that teachers try to impose their political views, and, the fear discussed previously (e.g. Horowitz 2006) that political science contributes to an ideological rather than scholarly agenda is not validated by the students. One single student provided statements concerning a slightly biased teaching (S12), but other students described their education as "very professional" or "unbiased".

When values have occurred in the classroom these have rather been connected to different theoretical perspectives, as a way of making sense of, and explaining, for example, liberalism or conservatism, according to the students. When asked whether a certain normative position could be said to be privileged, one student answered:

> No, I really don't think so. No, I really don't think so because this course was so really successful when it comes to presenting many perspectives, and I think that is very important when it comes to that [not privileging a certain position] (S8).

Along this line, another student points to the importance of different perspectives and the way these different perspectives secure a pluralism of accepted views present in the classroom:

> No, I mean I feel that there has been a range of perspectives. Like, "this perspective looks at a certain problem in this way, and based on this perspective it should be handled in this way" (S3).

This student later describes this in terms of "there hasn't been a right answer" during the discussions, and that the teacher has rather encouraged students to see different problems from different theoretical positions (c.f. S2, 7, 8). By doing this, the teachers have also encouraged students to develop important academic skills, such as problematizing and critical thinking (c.f. Olsen and Statham 2005; Wendt and Åse 2014). According to some students this is typical for the academic context, "the university is all about the ability to think freely, by yourself, and that won't happen if the teacher is up there just stating his own opinion" (S2).

In sum, students were content with the way their teachers handled the existence of values within the political science classroom. They felt they had been given the opportunity to reflect freely upon political issues from a range of different perspectives, and their intellectual development had not been negatively influenced by personal opinions of teachers. In general, this kind of teaching strategy also seems to be in accordance with the students' understanding of the nature of the subject they are taught (c.f. Greene, Azevedo, and Torney-Purta 2008). In line with how the teachers have

structured the discussions, students don't seem to expect to be given "a right answer" by the teacher but rather to be given the possibility of strengthening their analytical skills (c.f. Badersten 2014).

These discussions relate to dimensions of students' epistemic beliefs and *simplicity of knowledge* (Mason 2016). In line with how this dimension underscores whether knowledge is seen as generated from simple statements, or through the complex interaction of different conceptual statements, it becomes clear that both teachers and students view knowledge and knowledge production as a highly complex endeavor where different sources of knowledge are used.

Values should ideally be left outside the classroom

When discussing values in the classroom on a principal level, the preferred learning situation was discussed in terms of "objective" or "neutral", and these concepts, objectivity, and neutrality, are used interchangeably even though they mean quite different things (Miller-Lane, Denton, and May 2006). While a teacher may strive for objectivity through revealing his or her position—it should always be clear where a position is derived from and who's advocating this—neutrality rather means that the teacher never publicly takes a stand on a certain issue. In the following, however, this distinction is absent. Both concepts are used in the sense of not revealing personal opinions, and in general students prefer their teachers to be "value-neutralists".

This understanding of the preferred "objective" teacher can be seen in the light of the dimension *certainty of knowledge* (Mason 2016). Students seem to believe that there is objective political science knowledge that teachers are able to present as long as they do not put their own opinions or values into this knowledge.

The wish for neutral professors is, for example, evident in statements concerning a teacher that one student had appreciated a lot during the course. The main motive for the admiration was that "he wasn't politically flavoured, that is he wasn't being ideological" (S11, cf. S4).

Connected to this theme is also a "fear of indoctrination" if neutrality in political science teaching is not ensured. One student began by declaring that it would be unprofessional for a teacher to explicitly state his/her views, and points to the risk that the personal view of the professor might be seen as objective truth by students, "some might consider it a truth when it is being said by such a well-educated scholar" (S10). In line with discussions by Diana Hess (2009), this student seems to underline the existing power relation between teachers and students. Because of this power balance, teachers may influence their students when stating personal opinions and ideas. Another student raises similar concerns in relation to teachers who state personal opinions:

> Well actually I would get a little bit provoked because when you listen to teachers you tend to consider everything being said as facts, since that person is highly educated. So, when the teacher says something it is being regarded as a fact rather than an opinion (S13).

These quotes show how students assess the *source of knowledge* (c.f. Mason 2016). They point to the fact that the knowledge seems more certain when a teacher transmits it, and that the standpoint of the teacher, therefore, might become privileged.

The teacher has stated "the truth" and because of that, alternative standpoints may be silenced.

It is also evident that some issues or standpoints are considered more problematic than others. When discussing teachers revealing their standpoints on preferred policy options concerning environmental issues, such as pollution or global warming, and opinions on whether schools should be public or private, some students make a clear distinction between teachers who display opinions in regard to environmental issues, and the ones who articulate a standpoint concerning schools and equity (cf. S3, S4, S8, S9). The students are much more reluctant to teachers who discuss personal opinions on the latter issue since this is regarded as "more political" and "more controversial (S8) than environmental issues. One student describes how she would not have a problem with a teacher who displays opinions concerning environmental issues since this issue "benefits all" and is of a more technical nature (S3).

Thus, it seems that students regard environmental issues as nonpolitical and mere issues of expertise. Even though, it is obvious that environmental issues have to do with public affairs, are bound up with relations of power, and are deemed important by the voting public, these issues are believed to be less political than issues relating to social class. The students seem to categorize knowledge in regard to these issues differently; knowledge in relation to environmental issues is seen as absolute, certain, and nonproblematic, while knowledge concerning other issues is conceived as ambiguous and idiosyncratic (Mason 2016).

Beliefs about *certainty of knowledge* are in these examples highly dependent on content or topic. In addition, if students believe there is certainty s/he does not find the topic controversial or "political" but if certainty is seen as lacking the topic is controversial.

Thus, whether the discipline comprises issues that we may reach certain knowledge of or not, seem to be an open question for the students. Such an uncertainty may also be something that troubles students in their search for an understanding of the discipline.

Teachers' right kind of values – in relation to students' values

As previously stated, political science students wish for their teachers to leave personal opinions outside the classroom. However, at the same time students seem to be aware of the impossibility of maintaining impartiality. Students declare that all humans, also teachers, have value preferences and that these might probably still enter the classroom in some way. However, when value preferences are part of classroom discussions, this is generally viewed as "a necessary evil", and not, for example, as a pedagogical move. To argue for a certain position could be understood as a way of visualizing how political scientists work in their own research (Olsen and Statham 2005) but students do not raise this possibility.

Returning again to the dimension of *certainty of knowledge* (Mason 2016), this stance on a preferred but impossible objectivity, would suggest that students' beliefs about knowledge alter between an objectivist view of knowledge, where objectivity still may be discussed, and a position of multiplicity where knowledge is ambiguous (Mason 2016). In relation to such a

dual position it is important to consider the epistemology, or theory of knowledge, within the subject itself (c.f. Depaepe, De Corte and Verschaffel 2016). As mentioned, scientists are among themselves utterly diverse in this regard (Marsh and Stoker 2010); certain subfields and theories are maintaining traditional scientific ambitions of finding objective truths, others have abandon such aspirations and this diversity might leave students uncertain about the role of objectivity in the domain (cf. VanSledright and Maggioni 2016).

When looking more closely at students' discussions of preferred but impossible objectivity, it also becomes clear that such an imperfect objectivity not necessarily poses a problem for the students. As long as privileged values are the "right kind of values", or "handled in a proper way" by the teacher, students seem believe this is okay.

In this theme, such proper ways of dealing with values are described, as in, 'it is okay to impose values if it is the right kind of bias that is being displayed by the teachers'. Here, the right kind of values seems to be the ones students sympathize with rather than, for example, values that are perceived as morally right, such as values that are connected to liberal democracy.

One student discussed the wish for an unbiased education but when it came to the possibility of having a professor that had explicit opinions that were in line with her own, the student responded: "I would have found that agreeable, because then I could pat myself on the back, even though I can see that it's not an ideal situation" (S4). In line with previous research underlining how students' values and sense of self influence learning in social sciences (cf. Lundholm 2018; Lundholm and Davies 2013), this student it is clearly influenced by his/her sense of self in relation to values s/he finds acceptable. Since it is "the right kind" of values that are being put forward, the student's sense of self is not challenged, but rather strengthened.

This search for confirmation of beliefs among students can be problematic from a learning perspective. Conceptual change is a process of acquiring a scientific understanding of a phenomenon, concept, or theory, and in this process initial understandings might need to be challenged, or previous knowledge reorganized, in the development of scientific knowledge.

This aspect on beliefs is also evident in a response when a student was asked whether a teacher should be allowed to express his/her personal view:

> Well, that depends… those times that I have felt that a teacher has expressed something [a personal view] during a course, it has pretty much been in line with how I think, and then I have probably seen it as something positive, but if it had been the other way around I might just as well have thought of it as problematic (S6).

Similar to the previous student (S4), s/he points to the fact that the sense of self is important in relation to values that are being put forward. However, s/he also acknowledges that in another situation, if values challenged the identity of the student, then s/he would be less enthusiastic about bringing values into the classroom.

Imposing values and bias in the right way

Another acceptable way of imposing values is when the bias of the teacher "is being done in the 'right way,'" suggesting that teachers should not openly display their value preferences but if they do, it should be done in a way that does not attract attention.

When discussing pedagogical practices and the possibility of teachers to be objective in the sense of taking an impartial stance, one student describes this in the following way, "in theory, I think that one ought to be totally objective, but I can see that this might not be possible, and then I think that one should do it [impose values] in the best possible way" (S4). The potentially best possible way is described as not explicitly stating a personal opinion in class but rather to discuss more thoroughly the preferred perspective or opinion, while at the same time discussing conflicting perspectives rather broadly. This means that the teacher has not openly displayed his or her opinion but nonetheless potentially influenced the students. This standpoint and suggested solution might indicate that conflicting epistemological stances are at play. The student seems to oscillate between different understandings of objectivity and impartiality that exists in the political science subject (cf. VanSledright and Maggioni 2016). On the one hand, the student draws on epistemological understandings that highlight the impossibility of being a "detached observer" and only mediate objective knowledge in the teaching process, on the other hand, the student has not given up the attempts to achieve a more objectivist standpoint on behalf of the teacher. The student still sees the objectivist standpoint as a teaching ideal (cf. Murstedt et al. 2014).

The importance of not being "too obvious" when arguing for a personal standpoint as a teacher is also discussed by another student. Regarding whether teachers should or should not state personal standpoints, one student shows a somewhat conflicting view. In this case, the student felt that the teacher should indeed strive for feminism and anti-racism when teaching but at the same time it would be "too concrete" if the teacher explicitly stated such opinions (S6). Another student proposed that the solution for a teacher in this situation might be to operate under an "imagined" objectivity:

> One has to accept the fact that it is impossible to achieve perfect objectivity. So it's probably more about… that teachers are to do this in a smooth way and not in an obvious way. I would accept it if it happened in a more concealed way (S7).

These findings are striking for a political scientist. For a subject that holds values such as intellectual diversity, pluralism and transparency at its core (e.g. Dahl 1961) it is surprising that students prefer values being imposed on them in a covert way. The teaching of political science should, in all fairness, be grounded in the same principles as the subject itself emphasizes.

Discussion

Results show that epistemic beliefs concerning *certainty*, *simplicity,* and *sources* of knowledge relate to students' conceptions of values in political science, and that values seem to trouble and confuse students (cf. Badersten 2014). The students give contradicting answers regarding the nature of values in the discipline and oscillate between different epistemic beliefs (cf. Hammer and Elby 2002). They, therefore, seem to have an unclear understanding of the *nature of the discipline* (cf. (Mason 2016); whether knowledge is stable and objective rather than changing and interpretative. They also seem unclear on how to justify a certain knowledge being produced or privileged, and students, therefore, seem to lack an understanding of the knowledge-creation practices within the discipline (cf. Goldman and Scardamalia 2013, 261).

That students experience this kind of confusion is not surprising, giving the unstable epistemology of the discipline itself. When students meet conflicting epistemological standpoints in different courses, and these differences are not highlighted and discussed, students must try to make sense of this patchwork themselves. We, therefore, believe that questions on the nature and limits of knowledge need to be prioritized in political science education. Many scholars highlight this as a fundamental aim of education: "True education, especially liberal arts education, was fundamentally about this kind of development – namely, the evolution of individuals' thinking structures and meaning making toward greater and more adaptive complexity" (Hofer 2001, 368). However, taking a reflexive position toward the nature of knowledge in a discipline may be considered an "unnatural act" (Wineburg 2001), and in line with Wineburg's discussion of students' historical thinking, students do not independently question their everyday epistemologies, and independently develop a subject specific epistemology. Importantly, lack of such an epistemology and the maintenance of a less sophisticated epistemology might in the end hinder students' learning. Not least since these kinds of inconsistent and uncoordinated standpoints have shown to hinder learning in other domains (cf. Lee 2004).

Teaching political science also needs to focus more on both *where* norms may exist (in relation to what topics/issues), and *how* norms could be understood and handled from a disciplinary perspective. Based on students' views that environmental issues are nonpolitical, teachers seem to have missed the opportunity to discuss *where* norms exist, although, a political dimension concerning human and social life is an important core issue in the discipline. The findings also suggest that students reproduce problematic understandings of environmental problems being purely "technical" and should be handled by experts in an objective way (cf. Fischer 1993, 22; Hajer 1995; Van Poeck and Östman 2017). It, therefore, seems that political science education might not have given students opportunity to problematize the marginalization of citizen participation on such a view even though public debate around public issues and citizen participation is a cornerstone of democratic governance (Dahl 1961).

Equally, there is confusion about *how* norms and values should be understood and handled within the discipline. Two unproductive strategies—imposing the particular values that students sympathize with, or imposing values in in a smooth/concealed way—using imagined objectivity—are put forward by the students as a way of dealing with the "necessary evil" of values within the discipline. To be able to develop better strategies, students need to be given guidance on how to understand the existence of values in the discipline, and to further problematize this existence. Without such guidance, students will have difficulties understanding the subject and themselves as political scientists.

Political science education is often highly fragmented. Different teachers, with different epistemological standpoints, meet students in different subfields, and even if a student has developed epistemic beliefs that are consistent with a particular subfield, these beliefs may not be consistent across subfields and contexts (cf. Chinn, Buckland and Samarapungavan 2011; Elby and Hammer 2001; Hammer and Elby 2002; Hofer 2001). This suggests that before teachers start discussing important scholarly questions in regard to particular subfields, they might need to address broader questions concerning

the subject in general—how are we to understand the political science subject as such—and epistemological multiplicity in the discipline.

Further research

If we know about students' understandings and dilemmas, we can improve instruction to better meet the needs of students. The study presented here is small and explorative, and further research is needed concerning how learning is influenced by epistemic beliefs, along with sense of self and emotions. More research is also needed in order to understand how students relate to, and learn, about *normative theory* within the discipline, as this is one of the core subfields.

In a time where a range of normative questions concerning migration, gender, equality and democracy are lively debated, but also confronted, the question of how to handle such topics in a classroom is urgent. Is a teacher, in the name of neutrality, only to show different sides of these issues as well as other political issues? Is it, for example, normatively desirable, or even ethically defensible, for a political science teacher not to explicitly object to actions that aim to limit or restrict minority rights or democratic rights? Bias is in this sense not necessarily a bad thing if the bias is in favor of values that are fundamental to constitutional liberal democracy.

Note

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