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Concepts of Public Opinion and Public Subjectivity:

From the Point of View of Lay People

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1. Introduction

Concepts of public opinion are rich and complicated. They have no single definition because they are subject to historical environment, political systems and development of scientific and research methods (Herbst, 1993a, 1993b, 1998; Noelle-Neumann, 1991, 1995; Price, 1992; Yeric & Todd, 1996; Beaud & Kaufman, 2001). However, most of concepts are derived by researchers from the points of view of elitism, theories and research aspects. Whether the general public has the same view of concepts of public opinion with theory angle is still not know. The lay theory that stresses the common-sense understanding of events and the world in everyday lives can help us to resolve problems raised by the absence of micro-studies of public opinion. The study of lay theory of public opinion is important because it describes how people think about public opinion, which in turn may be related to specific opinions directed at self and others. Therefore, this study adopts the lay theory to discuss concepts of public opinion.

The “public” is always an important actor in the process of public opinion, but the study of the public subjectivity of public opinion has been neglected by past academic research. Dewey (1925:208) states that “personality, selfhood, subjectivity are eventual functions that emerge with complexly organized interactions, organic and soul.” Therefore, subjectivity is not something given, a soul or a cogito, outside organic and social life processes. Rather, subjectivity arises functionally when interaction becomes complex (Brinkmann, 2004). The public subjectivity of public opinion also arises functionally when interactions occur in micro worlds (people everyday life talking, thinking and acting) and macro worlds (social context, media reports etc.). Rosen (1991) believes that research of the public dissemination of public opinion should pay attention to the public, not only from the theoretical aspect, but also from the aspects of intellectual and judgemental problems of lay people. If we think the public is the most important actor in the process of public opinion, it is necessary to understand how people think about “public opinion” and their awareness of their role in the process of public opinion. This study also hopes to explore the meaning of public subjectivity and construct the relationships between public opinion and public subjectivity.

Interpreting public opinion is diverse and complicated. In the past, most research studied public opinion from academic and elitist points of view; from a macro viewpoint. The purpose of this study instead tries to explore how individual citizen interprets and understands public opinion. The lay theory can help us to resolve the absence of micro-studies of public opinion. This approach provides a micro viewpoint to study public opinion and public subjectivity that could fill the research gap which past research has neglected. The study purposes of this study are: 1) how lay people interpret public opinion 2) how the meaning of public subjectivity and the relationship between public opinion and public subjectivity can be clarified by discussions with lay people.

2. Literature Review

In this study, the literature will be explained from two perspectives. First, this study summarizes the concepts of public opinion. Second, based on the lay theory, this paper discusses public subjectivity and the relationships between public subjectivity and public opinion.

2.1 The concepts of public opinion

In academic discourse about politics, one of the most widely used but least understood construct is public opinion. Public opinion is an essential concept in democratic theory, but it has been very difficult to define (Glynn et al., 1999). Child (1965) and Allport(1937) located scores of very different definitions in the academic literature. Herbst(1998) pointed out that the concepts of public opinion are affected by the democratic social climate, science and research methodology and the environment of mass media. Researchers have found it impossible to reach a shared definition of public opinion. Although the word “public” is even more ill defined and complex than “constituency,” in Herbst’s 1998 study, she found that staffers, journalists, and activists provide varying conceptions of the public. Splichal (1999) even thought that, as a result of empirical studies of public opinion, public opinion has continued to be seen as the meaning of objects (referents), and that is why the concepts of public opinion are varied.

Herbst (1993a) has made a study that focuses on citizen’s definitions of the elusive phenomenon scholars have labeled public opinion. The respondents’ answers

to her study were extremely varied, yet the definitions and theories informants articulated about public opinion fell into four categories. Public opinion was described as: (1) an aggregation of many individual opinions concerning a particular topic, (2) the opinions of a majority or vocal minority; (3) a consensus about issues; or (4) a fiction, or much too vague a term to be meaningful in serious political discourse (Herbst, 1993:445). Glynn et al. (1999:17-26) believed that there are five reasonable definitions of public opinion that are distinct, but also overlap to some extent. They also indicated that it is best not to treat these categories as mutually exclusive, since the lines between them are not as clear as we might like. The five categories are:

- (1) Public opinion is an aggregation of individual opinions.
- (2) Public opinion is a reflection of majority beliefs.
- (3) Public opinion is found in the clash of group interests.
- (4) Public opinion is media and elitist opinion.
- (5) Public opinion is a fiction.

Public opinion takes on a different meaning depending on whether it is brought into play as a critical authority in connection with the normative mandate that the exercise of political and social power be subject to publicity or as the object to be molded in connection with a staged display of and manipulative propagation of publicity in the service of persons, institutions, and consumer goods (Habermas, 1989). Habermas (1989) further indicated that both forms of publicity compete in the public sphere, but the public opinion is their common address. Beaud & Kaufman (2001) concluded that Habermas's concepts of public opinion reflect three meanings—sociologico-descriptive, ideologico-political, and ethico-normative concepts. This is similar to Splichal's (1999) and Arnold's (2007) suggestions that a systematization of Tonnies' terminology differentiates between "opinion of the public" (*die Offentliche Meinung/ Public Opinion*), "public opinion" (*eine offentliche Meinung/ a public opinion*), and "published opinion" (*offentliche Meinung/ public opinion*).

2.2 Lay theory and public opinion

Many researchers interested in micro-level and collective behavior have used in-depth, interpretive approaches to study citizens' political beliefs, but much of this research was driven by an interest in the theories citizen use to think about public opinion (Herbst, 1993 : 440). The theories people use in their everyday life have been termed lay, implicit, naïve, intuitive, common sense, and background beliefs because people are not necessarily aware of their theories or the impact of those theories on

their social understanding (Hong, Levy & Chiu, 2001). The study of the impact of lay theories on people's social understanding has a long history in personality and social psychology.

The study of 'lay' (or implicit) theory in psychology began with Heider (1958). Heider thought that the study of interpersonal relations would emphasize what he called common-sense psychology. Heider believed that this gives us insights into why people behave as they do, and may also help social scientists refine their theories of human behavior (Herbst, 1993:440). Fuenham (1988:2-6) pointed out that lay theories can be differentiated from scientific theories in several ways. Lay theories tend to be implicit rather than explicit, inconsistent in their articulation, and tend to confuse cause and effect.

The anthropologist's point of view used to adapt the "Folk Model" to describe these theoretical frameworks. As D'Andrade (1987:114) stressed "...they use the model but they cannot produce a reasonable description of the model. In this sense, the model is like a well-learned set of procedures one knows how to carry out rather than a body of fact one can recount. In addition, the anthropologist Geertz (1983) in his book, *Local Knowledge*, mentioned that common sense can transform the unfamiliar world into a familiar world. Everyone can use his (her) common sense as intelligent thinking to judge the things that happen in everyday life. In other words, the view of the Folk Model or lay theory indicate that people often use common sense to understand things in their life, but obviously people are not aware that they have a "theoretical" system of observing the world and social events.

Berger & Luckmann (1966) pointed out that reality is socially constructed and the sociology of knowledge must analyse the process in which this occurs. The key terms in these contentions are 'reality' and 'knowledge', terms that are not only current in everyday speech, but that have a long history of philosophical inquiry behind them. Everyday life presents itself as a reality interpreted by men and subjectivity meaningful to them as a coherent world. How this common sense reality may be influenced by the theoretical constructions of intellectuals and other merchants of ideas is another question.

Some of the most important contributions in this area have come from political scientists who studied the essence of political belief systems among lay people. According to Herbst's article (1998:165-166), Lane (1962) was a pioneer in interviews with a small group of citizens. In an attempt to understand the unique

ideological systems and political experiences of his informants, Lane questioned them at length about a variety of topics. Herbst (1993b), interviewing lay people in her study, found that the majority of the American people think that public opinion surveys represent the concept of public opinion.

People in daily life often fail to be aware of their own theories, and these theories will affect their understanding of social event, society and the world. Although the lay theory lacks rigorous scientific theory, people often rely on regular knowledge and common sense to create a stable and meaningful system (Hong, Levy & Chin, 2001). In other words, the lay theory plays a function in creating sense and knowledge making. Public opinion is full of rich and complex cultural and social patterns. People's interpretations of meanings of public opinion, in fact, reflect not only on the individual level, but also on the social level.

Past studies major focus was on the macro, elitist, and academic aspects of studying public opinion, but lacked any emphasis on how people construct their own definition of public opinion. Only the American scholar Herbst (1993a, 1998) tried to adopt the lay theory to explore people's perception of public opinion, although her research did not emphasize other related concepts, such as public subjectivity and its relationship to public opinion.

2.3 Public opinion and public subjectivity

The concept of 'the public' is central to the concept of public opinion. Habermas (1989) posited the public as carrier of public opinion, and its function as a critical judge in court. In addition, the public appears simply as the sector of public opinion that happens to be opposed to public authority. He believed that public opinion as the sociological collective that combine with readers, viewers or citizens, and that public opinion gives these people critical and political power, as well as the ability of rational communication and debate (Habermas, 1989; Peters, 1993:543; Splichal, 1999). Although Habermas's concept of the public is of a very strongly critical and normative character, Peters (1993:559) indicates that the main theme in Habermas's book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (STPS)* is to solicit public participation. The function of the public sphere is to create an "opening to public subjectivity," that is, the capacity of the public to discuss and deliberate.

In addition to Habermas, educator and political philosopher Dewey, as well as Arendt, also emphasize the importance of public subjectivity in the process of public opinion (Yang, 2004). Dewey stressed that the public essence of public opinion means that all knowledge and theories, as well as politics, emancipate from people social life, and then form public subjectivity. Dewey (1939) blamed the distractions of modern society. In discussing the distractions of modern society, Dewey explained that those distractions are far more prevalent and bountiful in today's society. He thought that technology was the main perpetrator of these distractions. Dewey (1939) indicated that the telegram, telephone, motor car, and radio had drawn people's attention from politics to non-political matters. These technologies are far more desirable topics of discussion for the everyday person than the latest news. Therefore, people are surrounded by the products which are created by human knowledge, and unlike their ancestors, directly involve in creating knowledge and participating society.

In other words, people are no longer the subject of knowledge, but are the object of knowledge. Therefore Dewey stressed that public participation in the public sphere should also reflect the reflexive thinking of people in daily private life. Dewey (1910/1919) even thought that people looks like the scientist using scientific inquiry to recognize problem and solve the problem in daily life. Only 'experimental' theories can therefore help us act and solve practical problems. Dewey (1922:177-178) said that we "know how by means of our habits," and this knowing how actually underlies, and is even a precondition for, our "knowledge of and about things, knowledge that things are thus and so, knowledge that involves reflection." The capacity for reflection, our ability to pause and consider alternative ways of proceeding in our actions, is derived ability, grounded in the more basic habitual comportment in the world (Brinkmann, 2004). Public knowledge and subjectivity were born when the public began using reflexive thinking to solve problem while they were affected by the direct or indirect consequences of transactions.

Dewey (1954) argued that a public does not actually exist until a negative externality calls it into being. He thought that this occurs when people perceive how consequences of indirect actions affect them collectively. Furthermore, Dewey asserted that community is where democracy must happen so that people can become active and express issues of public concern. In this way, the local community can become the 'Great Community'. This viewpoint points out that the essence of public subjectivity also lies in the relationship between the public and its community.

Regarding the public view of public opinion, Hannah Arendt stressed the importance of public thinking and actions. Arendt argued that the revolutionary spirit had not been preserved in America because the majority of people had no role to play in politics other than voting. Arendt also mentioned that the differences between "action" and "act" is that "act" is only an event which can be observed, but "action" is carried out with the intention of the public initiative, and the intention on behalf of public subjectivity (Lu Adams, 2007). Her book, *The Life of the Mind* (1978, edited by Mary McCarthy) was incomplete at her death. This book focuses on the mental faculties of thinking and willing (in a sense moving beyond her previous work concerning the *vita activa*). In her discussion of thinking, she focuses mainly on Socrates and his notion of thinking as a solitary dialogue between me and myself. Arendt is at pains to distinguish it from knowing. She draws upon Kant's distinction between knowing and understanding (Verstand) and thinking or reasoning (Vernunft). Understanding yields positive knowledge and it is the quest for knowable truths. Reason or thinking, on the other hand, drives us beyond knowledge, persistently posing questions that cannot be answered from the standpoint of knowledge, but which we nonetheless cannot refrain from asking. For Arendt, thinking amounts to a quest to understand the meaning of our world, the ceaseless and restless activity of questioning that we encounter. The value of thinking is not that it yields positive results that can be considered settled, but that it constantly returns to question again and again the meaning that we give to experiences, actions and circumstances. She believed that everyone should think, not just in an abstract style of thinking, but in thinking built on the experience of everyday lives and actions (Arendt, 1979).

In the third volume of *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt (1978) was planning to engage the faculty of judgment by appropriating Kant's *Critique of Judgment*; however, she did not live to write it. As noted earlier, Arendt bemoans the 'world alienation' that characterizes the modern era, the destruction of a stable institutional and experiential world that could provide a stable context in which humans could organize their collective existence. Moreover, it will be recalled that in human action Arendt recognized (for good or ill) the capacity to bring the new, unexpected, and unanticipated into the world. This quality of action means that it constantly threatens to defy or exceed our existing categories of understanding or judgement; precedents and rules cannot help us judge properly what is unprecedented and new. So for Arendt, our categories and standards of thought are always beset by their potential inadequacy with respect to that which they are called upon to judge. Arendt eschews 'determinate judgement', judgement that subsumes particulars under a universal or rule that already exists. Instead, she turns to Kant's account of 'reflective judgement', the judgement of

a particular for which no rule or precedent exists, but for which some judgement must nevertheless be arrived at. What Arendt finds so valuable in Kant's account is that reflective judgement proceeds from the particular with which it is confronted, yet nevertheless has a universalizing moment it proceeds from the operation of a capacity that is shared by all beings possessed of the faculties of reason and understanding.

The public is the subject of public opinion and a very important concept, but public subjectivity of public opinion has often been overlooked in past public opinion research. Based on the above discussion, this paper suggests that the principal of public subjectivity should be reflected in the capacities of problem inquiry, reflexive thinking, reflective judgement, critical communication and action. Dewey (1954) stressed the concept of interactive communities that also enrich the significance of public subjectivity. In particular, Arendt's argument of the need for ordinary people to learn how to think and judge a point of view, as well as Dewey's emphasis on public reflexive thinking in people's daily life, resonate with lay theory which stresses that people use lay, implicit, naïve, intuitive, common sense, and background beliefs for understanding the world. However past research has never adopted the lay theory to discuss the relationships between lay people and public subjectivity. This approach of lay theory provides a micro viewpoint to study public opinion and public subjectivity that could fill the research gap which past research has neglected. The research questions are as follows:

RQ1: What is lay people's perception of public opinion?

RQ2: What is public subjectivity from the point of view of lay people?

1. How do people become aware of a problem? What is the meaning of lay people's problem inquiry?
2. How do people think and judge a problem? What is the meaning of lay people's thinking and judgement?
3. How do people participate in action? What is the meaning of lay people's action?

3. Method

In order to explore public opinion and public subjectivity from the viewpoints of lay people, this study uses focus group interview as its research method. Unlike survey methods that typically ask individual subjects to answer a series of closed-ended questions, focus groups involve open discussion among a group of subjects. The approach is phenomenological in nature and discursive. Glynn et. al.

(1999:82) have pointed out that focus group research methodologies have been used in at least two different ways in public opinion research: as a check on or supplement to traditional survey methods and as a method that can stand on its own and cast light on aspects of public opinion formation ignored by more traditional methods. As Herbst (1998) indicated, people tend to define public opinion as part of an argument they make about political life in general. That is to say, people’s political cognition is also very much about argument, rhetoric, and even rationalization, and people’s thinking patterns often take the form of a large and complex argument about one’s local and distant environments. In addition, Herbst (1998) mentioned that studying lay theory through focus group research is clearly the most underdeveloped and unwieldy methodology at this point. Therefore, the focus group interview is an appropriate method in this study. The advantage of focus group interviewing is that informants may use their own words, schemas, and frameworks to elaborate on what they deem important.

In accordance with the purpose of this study, which emphasizes lay people’s views of public opinion and public subjectivity, members of general public are chosen as the interviewees in the focus group discussion. A total of 3 focus group interviews were held at Shih Hsin University (Taiwan) in order to understand the meaning of public opinion and public subjectivity (see Table 1). With regard to the recruitment of informants in this study, we used Internet recruitment (BBS as well as community College web sites), community recruitment and the snowball sampling method.

Table 1: Information on focus group interviews

	FGI (1)	FGI (2)	FGI (3)
Date	2007,4/26	2007,5/3	2007,5/10
Age	Under 30	31-50	Over 51
People amount	8	9	9
Location	FGI room in SHU	FGI room in SHU	FGI room in SHU

According to the research purpose and research questions, the interview questions were constructed as open-ended questions. The interview protocol of the focus group interview include two parts—public cognition of public opinion, and public subjectivity and public opinion. The FGI interview protocol is as follows (see appendix):

- (1) Lay people's awareness of public opinion
 - a. What do people think about public opinion?
 - b. Why do people assess the public opinion?
- (2) Public subjectivity and public opinion
 - a. Problem inquiry - How do people detect and inquire about problems?
 - b. Reflexive thinking, judgment, and action - how do people think about and judge problems and issues, what is the relationship between thinking and action, and how do people act?

4. Findings

According to the research questions, this paper first addresses lay people's awareness of public opinion. Second, this study explains the public subjectivity of public opinion from the viewpoints of lay people.

4.1 Concepts of public opinion from lay people

One central question for informants in this study was "Do you think about public opinion?" The answers to this question were extremely varied. Public opinion was described by participants in six categories.

Public opinion as majority opinion

What is public opinion? Almost everyone responded that it was the opinions of people or the opinion of the majority of people. However, our subjects could not describe what kind of people opinion in depth. That is, in our subjects' minds, "opinion of the people" is the general concept that defines public opinion.

... Generally speaking, public opinion should be the opinion of the majority people (Mr. Luo, 67 years old, Hsinchu city, civil servant)

Public opinion as polls

Since the beginning of the 1930s, opinion polls have been connected to the concept of democracy politics. Polls are considered the best indicator of measuring public opinion. Public opinion thus equals public opinion polls. Susan Herbst, in her 1993b study, found that many respondents defined public opinion as

“aggregation” opinion. This aggregation concept is the same as the sum of opinions (Zaller, 1994). But in the present study, only a few respondents reflected this view, and our findings are thus different from the Herbst’s findings.

...just now as I think of the term of public opinion, the first concept that comes into my mind is that the questionnaire ... something like the percentage or statistics of polls ... "(Mr. Luo, 32 years old, Taoyuan county, Engineer)

One of the respondents even thought that the concept of public opinion as majority opinion is a narrow definition of public opinion, and that the view of public opinion as a poll is a broad definition of public opinion.

... Narrowly speaking, public opinion is my thinking in my mind, or the psychological intentions of other people. Broadly speaking, public opinion is the same as the meaning of polls. I conclude by saying that public opinion is people’s intentions as presented by the polls ... (Mr. Chen, 55-years- old, Taipei, retired)

Public opinion as media coverage

Gamson (1992) has pointed out that the connection between media coverage and citizens’ opinions is much looser and more complex than a simple persuasion or agenda-setting model would anticipate. He argued that people are in constant conversation with the mass media and with each other. In conversation, they draw on their experience, but they also draw heavily on mass media frameworks that can tell them what public opinion is. Therefore, Herbst (1998) thought that media link micro and macro to a great extent because our conversations with friends, neighbors, and co-workers inevitably incorporate the images and the language found in the news. Many informants in this study also argued that public opinion with media coverage.

Basically I think that people are viewing public opinion as media reports. It something like a “stuff” that reflects the agenda reported by the media. You cannot hear most people’s opinion at all ... (Miss. Lin, 39 years old, Taipei, hotel employee)

One of the respondents indicated that public opinion is the public polls

reported by the media.

As for public opinion, that is, media coverage according to some political polls, telephone interviews, or internet polls..., or journalist interviews with people that lead to a news article ... This is the voice of the people. (Miss Liu, 36 years old, Nantou, information industry employee)

When opinion polls are reported, they become public opinion. That is to say, only when opinion is described as public discourse, is it considered as public opinion. Yang (2002) pointed out that the publicity of media articulates the claim of realism of public opinion in contemporary society. Anything that can be seen or heard in the media becomes the representation of public opinion. Anything that cannot be seen or heard in the media will never become "public opinion." Habermas (1989:247) claimed that in the vortex of *publicity that is staged for show or manipulation*, the public of non-organized private people is laid claim by public communication but not by the communication of publicly manifested opinions. The concept of public opinion shifts into the publicity of media discourse.

Public opinion as daily life talking

A small number of respondents expressed their view that public opinion originates from people talking in daily life, such as chatting with friends, talking in the traditional markets, parks and other public places, etc. Daily life talking lets people understand what public opinion is.

Traditional market! Sometimes I chat with vendors when I buy some vegetables and meats. They often tell me how bad the condition of the Taiwanese economy is...or talking with neighbors and thus learning about other people's thinking...(Ms. Lin, 39 years old, Taipei, hotel employee)

Public opinion as fluid water

According to Tonnies (1922, quoted from Arnold, 2007:12), there are three kinds of public opinion. Public opinion is gaseous (ephemeral) opinion, fluid

opinion, and solid (firm) opinion. Gaseous and fluid opinion are very similar to published opinion, but are explicitly a part of opinion that is superficial, changing, biased, or the ephemeral opinion of the day. That is to say, public opinion will depend on changes in people interests and social environments. In our focus group interview, none of the respondents felt that public opinion is stable, and many respondents believed that public opinion is a fluid like water. Aside from personal characteristics of instability, this study revealed that public opinion is affected by the changes of social environment and context.

*Basically I feel that public opinion is flowing, it depends on...
But I do not mean that I will follow the majority of people's
opinions. I mean that I will change my opinion in accordance
with a lot of factors ... However, public opinion is not stable.
(Miss Ho, 45 years old, Hsinchu, school teacher)*

Public opinion as elite opinion

Lippmann (1925) in his book, *The Phantom of Public*, argued that direct democracy was impossible because general citizens could not be expected to make rational decisions about public affairs. Therefore he further developed a theory of elite democracy (Lippmann, 1925; Glynn et al., 1999). He observed that the operations of politics were largely invisible and inaccessible to the average citizen and because of this, the public must depend on the mass media for information. But the media are incapable of providing correct and sufficient sorts of political information. Lippmann's observation of public opinion seems to reflect a real phenomenon of modern society. Indeed, our respondents also thought that public opinion merely reflects powerful people's or elitist's views.

*A lot of people say that public opinion is the voice of the people,
but these voices cannot be heard. The only voices that can be
heard are the voices of powerful and rich people ... What is my
opinion? The answer is the elite's interests; we just can follow...
(Chu, 41 years old, Kaohsiung, unemployed)*

4.2 Public subjectivity and public opinion

To establish a democratic theory, political philosophy cannot overlook thinking about public roles and functions in the process of public opinion. From the

perspective of lay theory, to articulate the public subjectivity and public opinion is another important purpose in this study. That is to say, this paper seeks to understand how people think of problems, inquire about problems and judge problems in their everyday lives, as well as how people act and what is the relationship between thinking and action, and so on. Answering these questions will help us to understand the public subjectivity of public opinion and the processes of people forming opinions.

4.2.1 Problem inquiry and issue concerns of lay people

Problem inquiry of issues relating to people's everyday lives and interests

According to Dewey (1938, quoted from Pellizzoni, 2003), inquiry rests on human practical engagement with the world. It begins when a problematic situation arises and calls for a solution. It begins in doubt and ends in knowledge. The everyday life situations and related interests of respondents in this study become the source of their problem inquiry. Therefore a shop owner who has a bad experience in running his business is, in particular, concerned about economic issues. Another respondent was clearly concerned about issues that conflicted with his interests.

Because I have a small store ..., and I have some relatives, such as my uncles, they have their own business also. Over the past few years, they have all been in a bad situation. I dare not say that this is due to Taiwan's bad economy, but I am really concerned about the economic condition in my country. (Mr. Xu, 29 years old, Taipei, store owner)

I am concerned about things..., especially when issues are connected to my interests. Then I will pay attention. (Mr. Chen, 28-year-old, Changhua, academic)

The study found that respondents are concerned about problems that are within their personal experience of life, but the news media will highlight what issues it thinks are important to people. In other words, lay people's life experience is a major source of people inquiring about problems. Different experiences of everyday life affect lay people's different cognition of important issues, but the media also play an important role in arousing which issues concern people.

Not long ago, a news report stated that the basic salary will increase to the percentage of... Then, I thought that was a very good thing. I think that prices of everything at this moment all are up, but that salaries are always not go up. So I think this is a very important issue ... (Mr. Chen, 30 years old, Taichung County, service industry employee).

Public interests vs. private interests

Most respondents regarded issues directly related to their interests and everyday life as important. What is the boundary between public interests and private interests? Eliasoph's (1998) study pointed out that when people talked about politics, they often emphasized the local, close-to home issues. In addition, people often do not link the close context of their everyday lives with the larger social context. In other words, the respondents in this study do not know how to recognize when faraway and how (not close to home) issues that are also related to their everyday lives and interests become a problem. In the following example, one respondent initially answered that she doesn't care about the construction of the Su-Hua Highway because she seldom travels to Hualien. However when the researcher and other respondents articulated this issue in another context (tax matters) that are related to her everyday life, she felt that the problem was important. In other words, people often have difficulty in connecting the relationships between private interests and public interests, and in distinguishing the differences between private interests and public interests.

Miss O: I would think it (The construction of Su-Hua Highway) has no direct relationship with me. I don't care about it... (36 years old, Taipei city, Unemployed)

Researchers: Oh, Why don't you care about it?

Miss O: I don't live in Hualien.

Miss Ho: Do you travel to Hualien ? (45 years old, Hsinchu, school teacher)

Miss O: I seldom go there.

Researchers: You rarely go to Hualien, so you don't care about anything about Hualien.

Miss O: I seldom go there ...

Researchers: What if the construction of Su-Hua Highway uses your

money?

Mr. Zhu: Of course, it must need money from all of us. How could you not spend the money, it must spend your money. (41 years old, Kaohsiung city, unemployed)

Miss Ho: Oh, I would be concerned about it then, ah, it is related matter.

Miss O: Yes, it is related to me...

4.2.2 Reflexive thinking, judgement and action of lay people

The concept of public subjectivity in psychology or other social sciences is an entity that is dependent upon social contexts and interactions. According to Dewey (1954), we should think of individuals or subjectivities themselves as dynamic processes or activities (Garrison, 2001:277), that is, as responses to the environment or moments in complex processes, and not as isolated actors or private subjectivities (Brinkmann, 2004:10). In other words, the process of reflective thinking should be deeply seated in people's habits, actions and conversations, as a process of self-understanding (Brinkmann, 2004). Therefore, how do people think, judge, and act will be discussed in the following content.

Constantly looking for answers to questions

Dewey (1922:177-178) said that we “know how by means of our habits,” and this knowing how actually underlies, and is even a precondition for, our “knowledge of and about things, knowledge that things are thus and so, knowledge that involves reflection.” The capacity for reflection, our ability to pause and consider alternative ways of proceeding in our actions, is derived ability, grounded in the more basic habitual comportment in the world (Brinkmann, 2004). Although the majority of our respondents facing problems still remain at a shallow cognitive level and only consider the surface of issues, there is still a small number of respondents who use problem inquiry to analyze problems and to look for answers to questions.

I personally care about the issue of the protest against the demolition of the Lo-Sheng Sanatorium because of my background. My major was history when I studied in university and that is why I pay attention to this issue. I am wondering that why these people (protesters) want to engage in this social movement,

although I myself did not participate. Also, I am curious about the formation of this issue. Maybe there is another part of the problem that I don't know about and it may be different from what is reported in the media. In fact, I think that the facts that represented in the media are not complete ...I have been looking for information from other sources, such as from the BBS to realize what other people are thinking and fresh ideas ... (Ms. Lin, 23 years old, Tainan city, student teacher).

Reflexive thinking and ways of transferring points of view

Arendt (1978) eschewed 'determinate judgement', judgement that subsumes particulars under a universal or rule that already exists. Instead, she turns to Kant's account of 'reflective judgement', the judgement of a particular for which no rule or precedent exists, but for which some judgement must nevertheless be arrived at. Arendt suggested that the practice of reflective judgement must first expand the scope of thinking of including other people's ideas into consideration. Then people need a sense of "imagination" which is a capability that can jump into the varied positions of different people in order to reduce the subjective judgments of self. These concepts regard reflective thinking as a necessary process of expressing and forming public opinion.

In this study, a small number of respondents in the interviews indeed used different perspectives to understand issues. The first example below shows that the respondents look at the movement against demolishing the Lo-Sheng Sanatorium from different perspectives, such as from historical and economic angles. The following example also points out that respondents can expand their scope of thinking to different positions, and that different points of view can actually enrich people's knowledge and reduce individual thinking bias.

For this topic (the issue of against demolishing Lo-Sheng Sanatorium), it has both side views.... If I use the historical point of view to judge this issue, I think I will agree to keep it, because it is a building of historical significance, it is an example of the historical development of Hsinchuang City. If I stand on the economic perspective, I will stand on the position of demolishing the Lo-Sheng Sanatorium because of consideration of community development and

traffic problems. ...It is just my personal way of thinking. (Mr. Chu, 30 years old, Taichung County, service industry employee).

... Because people have different backgrounds, they will often have different thinking perspectives. Background may determine his (her) point of view. So sometimes it is important to exchange viewpoints with others, that is, to hear other people's views ...For example, If I opposed it, I would think of why are there so many people who agreed to it, then I would think about the reasons people agree to it, which reasons I neglected to think about before...Even when I see the media, I also have this kind of reaction. However, after listening to other people's ideas you will often find that how limited your own ideas are... (Miss Ho, 45 years old, Hsinchu, school teacher)

Weakening and micro- level actions

This study found that lay people showing weak action (due to capacity-constraints and the protection of self), as well as micro-action (using networking or everyday life talk to express opinions and influence other people). It is also interesting to note that although people inactive in the political and social action, but active in the fight for consumer rights

The bus didn't stop when I waved my hand... I was very angry about it. Then I called the bus company and asked the manager to resolve this matter...(Ms. Yen, 25 years old, Taipei, university research assistant)

Some respondents believed that they could influence other people through small things which happened in their everyday lives. The study regard this as a as micro-level action. Hence, an example of a teacher who thought that he could influence students; An example of a security guard at Taipei Zoo sharing his idea with and communicating his opinions to tourists; Another is an example of a young man presenting his position on the web

One day I saw a teacher and a lot of students were waiting for the zoo bus. That teacher said "Everybody be quiet, I will count to 30," then the teacher started to count and the students stopped talking but some of students were still laughing. When the teacher counted to 28,

29, 30, students started talking again. I asked the teacher” Did you tell students what will they should do while they were quiet; did you tell them why you asked them to be quiet? What did they have to think about while you counted to 30? You should have let your students know that making a lot of noise in a public area is not polite.” Sometimes, a teacher just knows that quiet is good, but forgets to tell students the meaning of “Be quiet”. Many things can develop children’s ability to think...(Mr. Sun, 63 years old, Taipei, zoo security)

I rarely expressed my opinion in the public forum of newspapers, I used to present my opinion on my own blog... (Mr. Lin, 27 years old, Tainan County, social worker)

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Table 2 : The concepts of public opinion from lay people and academic

Concepts of public opinion from lay people	Concepts of public opinion from academics
Public opinion is a majority of people’s opinion	Public opinion is an aggregation of individual opinions
Public opinion is polls	
Public opinion is media coverage	Public opinion is social control
Public opinion is daily life talking	-----
Public opinion is fluid water	Public opinion is a fiction
Public opinion is elite opinion	Public opinion is media and elite opinion
-----	Public opinion is rational discourse

The goal of this study is to provide an initial exploration of lay theories or connotations of public opinion found among three focus groups of Taiwanese citizens. Although all of the theories informants subscribed to are reflected in the academic literature on Taiwanese politics, most respondents were extremely skeptical about the usefulness of the concept of public opinion. Some informants thought that media, big business, government or a combination of these institutions used the notion of public opinion to reach their own selfish goals. The results indicated that lay people share the

similar perspectives as elite and academic in understanding that public opinion is one kind of majority opinion, aggregative opinion or media opinion. From participants' concepts, we found that daily mouth-to-mouth communications around personal social interactions are part of public opinion; however, participants were ignorant of the concept that public opinion is engaged with serial rational discussions, deliberation and debates. This result may reflect that current Taiwanese environment does not provide a good atmosphere to let lay people understand how a discursive public opinion can be formed.

As for the public subjectivity, almost all participants showed strong attention to their daily lives and to issues associated with self-interest but a lack of attention to public interests even when it is important to a community or the nation. Also, these findings demonstrate that some lay people in this study choose to adopt weak political action. They think that protecting consumer rights is much more important than taking political or social actions. However, this does not mean that participants always adopt weak political action. Instead, participants often choose the internet and daily talk to express their opinion and judgments based on their value systems. This kind of action, reflexive but not traditional political action, should not be ignored while discussing public opinion. In other words, self-reflexive thinking is an important process of forming public opinion and connecting the private interests (private sphere) with public interests (public sphere) even when people don't take political action in the public sphere. As Dahlgren (2002:10) indicated, in theoretic terms, citizenship is not just a formal issue, but also one of self-creation through communicative means. People's citizenship is not merely a subjective matter: there are a range of mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion in different domains.

For a long time, public opinion has been an important concept in social science research, but much research is still accustomed to study public opinion from the angles of scientific rational, opinion polls and media to analyze the problem and the effect of public opinion, but it has overlooked studying public opinion from the nature of opinion, that is, people's point of view of public opinion and public subjectivity. This study of public opinion and public subjectivity of lay people hopes to fill the deficiencies in this regard. Because of the lack of previous research, it was difficult to formulate a theoretical concept of treatment of public subjectivity. For example, the concepts of subjectivity are bound to express different perspectives, such as psychological and political theory, but this article only discussed theories of public and public opinion to analyze the concept of subjectivity. Also what is the difference

between public subjectivity and citizenship? This must be discussed in future research. This paper also suggests that further study can explore this matter in great depth.

However, past studies of public opinion of public involvement were mainly conducted from the agenda-setting viewpoint, as well as the amount of people's knowledge of public issues to determine the capacity of public subjectivity in the process of public opinion. Researchers Dahlgren (2002) and Lewis (2001) both believed that the notion of knowledge found in the stunningly value-free. The actual empirical charting of political knowledge has been rapidly diminishing in the practices of opinion research, replaced at best with questions about what respondents think they know. The "uninformed citizen," the low level of civic competence, is something that is problematic for democracy to take up in serious, public ways.

In addition, Herbst (1998) revealed that public opinion research often uses the quantitative method of the survey and experimental design to study public opinion. This results in people tending to make decisions and solve problems according to established models. People just try to find a better answer to questions which are set by the researchers. She also mentioned that, out of the laboratory, people have arguments concerning public affairs, and they will not only provide an answer. The focus groups interviews in the present study were non-structured. The interview protocol was to use extensive probing, each of the interviews had its own unique characteristics, and this is what makes the methodology here different from traditional survey research or experimentation methods. It shows that talks, arguments and communication help people to link the gap between the micro and macro and the private sphere and public sphere.

Although this study originally hoped to choose samples with more diversity, almost informants in this study were thoughtful, well-educated people; their skepticism of public opinion was compelling. Respondents understood well how public opinion is measured and how it is discussed by elites, but they were generally unwilling to accept these biases. This paper suggests that in future research, samples with more diversity should be included, such as people with lower education and people who live in different parts Taiwan. In addition, the focus group interview reflects the aura of social context, social expectations may guide the respondents' answers in accordance with social value. Future study may use the participation observation method of field study to explore the relationship between everyday life people experience and public opinion, and seek to understand the public subjectivity

and public opinion from other theoretical perspectives. These steps may well enrich the concept of public opinion and public subjectivity.

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Appendix: Focus group interview protocol

1. Lay people awareness of public opinion
 - (1) What is public opinion in your mind?
 - (2) How would you define it?
 - (3) Do you think legislators, media, officials, scholars and experts, etc., can reflect public opinion?
 - (4) Are people's opinions stable or changing?
 - (5) How would you evaluate (measure) public opinion?
 - (6) Do you know the operation of public poll ?
 - (7) Do you think about public polls? Do you agree that polls represent people's opinions?
2. Public subjectivity and public opinion
 - (1) Problem inquiry
 - a. How do you think of politics?
 - b. Do you care about social events? Could please give a case that you are most concerned with right now?
 - c. Why do you care about it?
 - d. When you aware of a problem, do you think that you can change or solve this problem?
 - e. How do you feel about your capacity in this society and community?
 - (2) Reflexive thinking, judgment and action
 - a. How would you judge a problem or incident? How do you think about a problem?
 - b. When you face a problem, would you make problems hypothetical? If you do not understand the problems encountered, would you seek more knowledge about them? Or has this kind of situation never happened to you?
 - c. How do you find a solution for a problem?
 - d. Would you consider the differing views of any social event?
 - e. If your view is different to the view of the majority of people, what would you usually do?
 - f. Do you express your opinion or take an action? If you do not act, why not?
 - g. What kinds of actions can you possibly take?