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Making Sense of Complex Policy Worlds Using Interpretive Methods

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Biographies as a way of 'studying through': what can 'life history' method contribute to the 'policy worlds' approach?

Author

Jordan Carnaby King

PhD Candidate, University of Auckland, New Zealand

Jkin838@aucklanduni.ac.nz

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Biographies as a way of 'studying through': what can 'life history' method contribute to the 'policy worlds' approach?

Jordan Carnaby King (jkin838@aucklanduni.ac.nz)
Sociology Programme, School of Social Sciences
University of Auckland

Abstract:

The 'policy worlds' approach provides an anthropological perspective for analysing the myriad strands and connections of people, ideas, and spaces that interact in a policy field. 'Life history' research encompasses a set of approaches centered around collecting accounts of personal experience relating to a period in an individual's life. The use of life history materials for generating ethnographic insight has value with respect to the practice Reinhold terms 'studying through' in a policy field. My paper demonstrates how 'life history' methods may be used to generate rich accounts of lived experiences of key actors engaged in a policy field at a particular moment in time. The uses and benefits of utilizing 'life history' research in line with a 'policy worlds' approach are explored by drawing on perspectives and insights from my current 'life history' study of actors engaged in the development and introduction of new forms of marketisation in key public services areas in New Zealand.

Keywords: policy worlds, life history research, multi-sited ethnography, marketization

Introduction

Accounts of lived experience are an important but frequently overlooked source of data for the analysis of how policies come into being. In this paper I describe and explain the ways in which 'life history research' – the collection and analysis of biographical materials – can be employed in the study of public policy as a way of showing that policy results from the interactions of an assemblage of actors, practices, and forms of knowledge (Shore, 2012: 2–3). The 'policy worlds' approach (Shore et al., 2011) represents an attempt to place an anthropological gaze on how such assemblages form and play out, embracing the 'messy actualities' of how real social practice deviates from neat, positivistic models of how a policy development process operates. For Shore et al (2011: 1–2) policies create threads of relations, semantic spaces, subjectivities, and forms of knowledge, accordingly they see 'policies as windows onto political processes in which actors, agents, concepts and technologies interact in different sites, creating or consolidating new rationalities of governance and regimes of knowledge and power'. A key contribution for putting the approach to work in a particular research project comes from Reinhold (1994; Wright and Reinhold, 2011) who advocates for a form of multi-sited ethnography (see Marcus, 1995) to 'study through' the connections between 'seemingly disparate notes in a network of relations' and for 'contexualising and conceptualising that network' (Shore, 2012: 7). While life history research has been used in social policy research to consider relations between the public and community sector (see Lewis, 2008) my paper situates life history research within the context of the policy worlds approach, and Reinhold's operational strategy of tracing connections across multiple sites. The aim of the paper, then, is to provide an argument for the use of life history research across different space as well as to highlight the sociological insights the

approach may bring forth. With respect to the latter, my own research into recent marketisation reforms in New Zealand is brought to bear as a case study. While the research remains in progress, the central role of the New Zealand Treasury in driving marketisation policy forward and the Treasury habitus are presented through reflections gained through an analysis of life history material. The goal is to show that paying close attention to the life histories of key people, and where possible conducting life history interviews about an individual's career trajectory and experiences working on projects is a source of rich insight into how a 'policy world' is constituted.

What is life history research?

Life history research is an approach to generating qualitative data about the perceptions and experiences of actors. Curtis and Curtis offer a pithy definition:

> Life history research is an approach that collects and analyses data sourced from semi structured interviews with an individual about their biography. This interview material is typically subjected to triangulation – using secondary research to help contextualise the life history (2011: 65).

The recording and analysis of individual experiences is the cornerstone of life history research. For advocates of the approach the rich complexity of human lives offers a frame through which sharper social science accounts of the world can be made. According to Plummer (2001: 1) the approach is constituted by "a longing for social science to take more seriously its humanistic foundations and to foster styles of thinking that encourage the creative, interpretive story tellings of lives – with all the ethical, political and self-

reflexive engagements that this will bring". Plummer (2001: 19) notes that 'life stories' come assembled in a variety of modes ("biographies, autobiographies, letters, journals, interviews, obituaries"), can be self-authored or collected by another, exist in multiple forms ("long and short, past and future, specific and general, fuzzy and focused" etc) and that different terms exist to describe them ("life stories, life histories, life narratives, self stories, 'mystories', autobiographies" etc). Plummer (2001: 118–148) offers 'tricks of the trade' regarding how an interview could be structured but urges researchers to pay critical attention to the consequences epistemological assumptions made in data analysis, a point to be examined in greater detail below. Ultimately Plummer speaks to the multiple ways in which life history research can be 'done', reflected in the literature on the topic. Curtis and Curtis (2011) for example, provide an organized overview and framework for the use of life history research in their methodology text including instruction on the importance of triangulation to ensure validity, while Barrett (2015) sketches how Bourdieu, characterized by 'methodological eclecticism' deployed life history analysis across multiple research areas guided by a sense of their value. The gathering and analyzing of life histories in an academic context has become an established mode of qualitative research in the social sciences. Connell has notably used life history research in her investigations of masculinity (2005), 'intellectual workers' (2010a), and businessmen (2010b) because: "Life histories give rich documentation of personal experience, ideology, and subjectivity….but life histories also, paradoxically, document social structures, social movements and institutions. That is to say, they give rich evidence about impersonal and collective processes as well as about their subjectivity" (Connell, 2005: 89). Connell's (2010) life history case studies of private and public sector managers, by way of semi-structured interviews, engaged in intellectual work is also an important

reference point for the use of biographical data in the study of a policy field. Connell demonstrates the way in which some workers engage in thinking work required to reproduce neoliberal capitalism, delving into their career trajectories and tapping into her respondents view of the world. What followed was an account of the forms of knowledge used in their intellectual work, their career trajectories over many years the lifestyles they lead and their views of the world. Furthermore life history research and has been put to use to understand areas diverse as mass migration (Thomas and Znaniecki, 1958), masculinities (Connell, 2005, 2010b), class relations (Bertaux, 1981), male body building (Wacquant, 1995), and the hospitality labour market in the UK (Ladkin, 1999). The use of life history research in the policy context is relatively new. A key contribution in the social policy arena is that of Lewis (2008) who conducted 20 life history interviews of public sector and community sector workers to examine career trajectories and how people 'crossed over' between sectors. Demonstrating the flexibility of life history research Lewis structured his interviews in line with Ladkin's (1999)'life and work history analysis' in which 'experiences of work (whether in terms of formal career, activism, volunteering) were placed at the centre of the life history data collected' (Ladkin, 1999: 8). The result is a problematizing of a notion that activity in the 'state', 'private', or 'third' sectors can be demarcated as fixed categories by tracing the ways people move in and out of different spaces. In a differing approach, Pusey (1991) in his sociological study of Australian neoliberalism undertook 215 interviews across the upper echelons of the Australian Public Service, with a particular focus on the 'central agencies' of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Treasury, and Finance. Interviews covered family history, identity formation, educational background, career experiences including daily life 'at the office', opinions on Australian socio-political life including

questions on labour/capital relations, role of the state with regards to regulatory control, and political orientation (Pusey, 1991: 245–255). What emerges is a portrait of how social selection influences access to particular institutional spaces, with implications for policy development. In his analysis of the social backgrounds of members of the Australian higher bureaucracy, he finds a 'grossly disproportionate number of young men from Australia's expensive schools are concentrated in some very specific locations, most notably the Treasury' and through interview data found analysis found a relationship between social background and political orientation - those at the top of the social hierarchy being three times more likely to support a 'new right' political agenda (Pusey, 1991: 4). While Pusey does not explicitly use the terminology 'life history' research his focus on analyzing the life courses of people in important institutions, to put together a picture of their view of the world, and to carefully set out the implications for public development policy makes his work an important reference for scholars interested in how social structure intersects with policy making. Pusey's strategy of interviewing across different segments of the Australian Public Sector (central agencies, service departments, and industry agencies) produced insights into the characters of each, identifying hierarchical relations and different outlooks, incorporating an element of multi-sited comparison within the study, a characteristic explored in greater detail.

Thesis

My thesis is that gaining and analysing accounts of personal experiences of actors in a policy field has the potential to provide insights into the social practices that order particular spaces in the field; the forms of knowledge that are valorised in certain spaces – and the extent to which they transfer (intact, or modified) to other spaces; how key

moments in a policy development process unfolded; and into how particular spaces interact with wider arrangements of social power (for example class or gender). Life history research represents an underutilised approach to further understanding how policy making process *actually work*. The potential for life history research to create insights about the constructed and contingent nature of policy making means that it corresponds with the aims of interpretivist approaches to policy study, as well as the policy worlds approach.

Interpretive approaches have at their a core a concern with how 'policy making' is a social practice shaped by history, knowledge production and circulation, power relations, and discourse. Fischer (2016) orients us to the nature of the interpretivist view of how policy develops which he characterises as running counter to 'dominant technocratic empiricist' accounts. In the interpretivist mode, careful attention must be paid to the actual work policy makers carry out and the socially constructed nature of the political policy world. Fischer relates that rather than building quantitative models around policy processes we must enter the world of policy actors to understand what they are thinking, how they make sense of knowledge and circumstances, and what assumptions drive action forward. Critical policy analysis requires an understanding of policy as 'shaped in the situational context of 'policy work', 'a kind of habitus in Bourdieu's terms' (Fischer, 2016). For Fischer this context is influenced by a broader context of the circulation of social and political ideas and theories. According to Stone (in Fischer 2016) "policy making is a constant discursive struggle over the definition of problems, boundaries of categories, and the criteria for evaluation". Thus a challenge for the policy researcher is to trace how this struggle plays out through careful analysis of texts. Furthermore Fischer (2016) notes:

> As theorised in the argumentative turn, interpretive policy analysis focuses on how policy arguments are constructed as a complex blend of factual statements, social meanings, normative judgements and assessments. The argument, as such, provides the link between the relevant ideological discourses, the available data and the conclusions of the analysis. This approach then, brings in essential intersubjective data, normative knowledge basic to the real-world policy processes but this does not mean that the approach is soft – and consequently inferior – as often implied.

Applying this to my current research project, the implication is that the policy analysts at work in 'central agencies' (the New Zealand Treasury in my project), 'operational agencies', and consultancies are not producing policy recommendations based on 'objective fact' but are in fact undertaking intellectual work that involves processes of interpretation, creation, and struggle – rather than disclosing an objectively secure solution - shaped by the socially constructed environments of the workplace (habitus) as well as broader ideological and socio-cultural influences. Social meanings, judgements and assessments are shaped by complex life worlds and require greater analytic scrutiny. Shore and Wright pick up the epistemological underpinnings of the interpretive turn and run with them in some important directions. A key contribution is the spatial understanding of the way in which different actors across different sites – not just policy analysts at the bureau – contribute to both the production of policy and form views on what a policy *means;* how it is understood in their context. 'Public policies' are conceptualised as sites for the examination of the social practice of policy making informs

the project. According to Shore this approach: "starts from the premise that 'policy' is itself a curious and problematic social and cultural construct that needs to be unpacked and contextualized if its meanings are to be understood" (Shore, 2012: 89). In the 'unpacking process' Feldman's (2011) notion of 'non-local ethnography' (2011) informs the 'policy worlds approach' by focusing attention on a variety of materials and texts that demonstrate how 'events, processes and actors intersect' (Shore, 2012: 89). Thus, the notion of 'studying through' (Reinhold, 1994) or paying close attention to the interactions of various agents in multiple sites in the development or reform of a policy is integral to the 'policy worlds approach'. This notion builds upon the work of Marcus (1995) in stressing that multiple sites and texts require attention in understanding how policy is made as well as interpreted (Shore, 2012: 96). Multiple sites and multiple actors were essential to Mosse's (2011) ethnographic work of the United Kingdom's Department for International Development, where his observations of internal dynamics, institutional politics, and the importance of interpersonal relationships in securing contracts and career advancement contrasted with the discursive constructions of both DFID as an agency and the notion of the 'professional' subject. Mosse's use of ethnography and document analysis is indicative of how a policy worlds approach delves into the messy actualities of a policy field and the way in which multiple materials require analysis. Thus according to Shore and Wright (2011: 15) "…political speeches, records of parliamentary debates, official reports, newspapers, television and radio broadcasts, websites and blogs, published interviews autobiographies can all be read as significant cultural texts that shed light on the way policy problems are framed and contested". While Shore and Wright mention biographical material in passing, the use of life history research to gain insights about the policy making habitus, the characteristics of those within it, and accounts of

how processes have unfolded and been experienced is in my view highly necessary in understanding policy development. While an interpretive approach seeks to qualify, situate, and deconstruct the work of policy actors it does not tell us much about how the actors got there in the first place, how long they've been active within a space, and their view of the world. Similarly, while the policy worlds approach represents a useful way of tracing flows of knowledge and perspectives across space and time, and indeed encourages the use of biographical materials as a way of making sense of a policy space a clearer statement of the benefits of life history research is offered here in theoretical terms and then through the relating of insights from a case study. It must be noted, however that life history research is in a sense instrumentalized as a way of tracing connections across time and space in a similar way to how a policy world's approach views other materials such as those described above.

Complexities

Life history research is not without plentiful debate on epistemology. The question of where the individual sits *vis a vis* social structure is a key epistemological question for the life history approach, as it in the social sciences generally. Plummer (2001: 103–114) offers a position on life history research by way drawing on Thomas & Znaniecki's (1958) *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*– a major work representing the 'Chicago School' of life history-based sociological work in the 1920s and 1930s. Plummer relates that Thomas & Znaniecki takes a 'middle position' on the a debate which 'has dominated sociology since its inception' the 'relationship between the individual and the social' (2001: 105). Extrapolating from Thomas & Znaniecki this 'middle approach' manifests in "a position in which both individual and social factors must always be taken into

account in any social study" (2001: 105), which Plummer casts in contradistinction to the fixity of what he terms Durkheim's 'famous dictum' to "treat social facts as things" (2001: 105). In a response drawn from an account of two sons reacting in different ways to the behaviour of their father, Plummer recounts Thomas & Znaniecki's notion that 'the cause of a social or individual phenomenon is never another social or individual phenomenon alone, but always a combination of a social and an individual phenomenon' (Thomas and Znaniecki, 1958: 44). Other commentary relating to the epistemology of life history method include perspectives on narrative and truth (Carr, 1986) and the way in which an ordered, tidy self is presented in an interview context despite life being a fractious 'pastiche' of experiences. Atkinson and Silverman (1997) demonstrate that scrutiny and reflexivity are required in understanding the validity of materials.

Barrett (2015) synthesizes Bourdieu's engagement with life history material, pointing to Bourdieu's multiple uses of life history material as well as epistemological concern. Bourdieu critiques much life history material as 'illusory' due to an 'implicit, problematic, and unspoken commitment to a particular philosophy of the subject' – the notion of an individual life as coherent, with 'overarching purpose', and 'an ahistorical sense of agency' (Barrett, 2015: 2). This often results in sociological accounts which tend to 'theorize the self in terms of a totalizing, narratable entity, rather than the more fragmented, partial, and contradictory logics that Bourdieu regards as more attuned to the realm of lived experience' (Barrett, 2015: 2). A life must be understood, then, not as a linear experience directed by the agency of an individual but as situated within the habitus, defined as a 'socially constituted system of cognitive and motivating structures' (Bourdieu, 1977: 76) which order and reproduce social practice in sites of human activity.

Barrett (2015: 2) relates that for Bourdieu:

> …the principles underlying practice are not articulated through explicit pedagogical intervention nor necessarily formally "known" by actors; they are, instead imperceptibly rooted in the dispositions, embodied habits, patterns of perception/categorization, and emotional resonances of the habitus.

In Bourdieu's theorization, research attention must pay attention to the characteristics of particular habitus as well as personal narration that comes out of life history interview. To this end Bourdieu (1996, 2005 in Barrett, 2015: 4) deploys a metaphor of the Paris metro:

> Trying to understand a career or life as a unique and self sufficientself-sufficient series of successive events without any other link than association with a 'subject'…is almost absurd as trying to make sense of a trip on a metro without taking the structure of the network into account, meaning the matrix of objective relations between the different stations.

Bourdieu sees the interpretation of life history material as necessitating 'a detour through the construction of social space to elucidate the invisible weightiness of historical structure againstwhich individual lives are lived' (Barrett, 2015: 4).

Indeed Bourdieu advocates research into 'collective social trajectories', understood to mean an emphasis on how individuals 'negotiate prevailing social environments' in

stratified societies (Barrett, 2015: 4). Barrett points out that many life history research projects do delve into 'collectivities' noting Connell's (2005) *Masculinities* as an exemplar in this regard.

Bourdieu (in Barrett, 2015: 5) also articulates a theory of strategy that may shape the way in which life accounts are told to researchers based on the knowledge a participant has of to the audience the account may address, thus something of a calculus of interest may order a narrative. However rather than representing an invalidation of what is said, Barrett comments that 'an interrogative awareness of the strategic deployment of life history narratives is an important analytic prism offered by Bourdieusian sociology' (Barrett, 2015: 5). Curtis and Curtis (2011) offer a discussion of life history account validity with respect to the use of 'triangulation' or using other materials to compare and contrast with what is told the researcher, however it may be that a researcher's own habitus, and sense of the subjects under consideration will provide a sense of strategic ways of talking. Lewis (Lewis, 2008: 563) also notes that the 'power of authorial control' is an area of potential concern stating that 'a researcher does not simply 'give voice' in a straight straightforward way, but in practice he or she decides what goes in and what is taken out of the account, and makes crucial decisions about how the material is framed', Lewis advocates researcher transparency with respect to how materials have been interpreted. Producing analysis can itself be an activity fraught with difficulty. The personal reflections of Mosse (2011) on his in-situ ethnographic research into social practice at the Department for International Development (DFID), resulting in observations at odds with strongly held professional identities, demonstrates the way in which a researcher's approach may be obfuscated – the research itself becoming a site of political contestation.

As with any research project, what is achievable is bounded (rightly) by ethical frameworks, the willingness of participants to participate, and the resources of the researcher. On this last point Lewis (2008: 563) notes that the method 'asks a great deal of both researcher and informant' in terms of the labour involved in interviewing (not all interviews will be equal in terms of articulation and openness), transcription, and theme identification.

Applying the approach

Having demonstrated where life history research connects with the theoretical tenets of the interpretive turn and the policy worlds approach, and covering off a number of areas of epistemological complexity the value of the approach requires further articulation. The value of using life history research is what it reveals about processes and social spaces as well as the characteristics and trajectories of the people in those spaces. In my research project analysing the emergence of marketisation policy reforms in the provision of social housing, the aim is to understand how participants came to be doing to the job they do (policy analyst, consultant, housing NGO officer), their experience of being an actor engaging in part of the policy development process, insights into everyday life in the spaces they inhabit. How a person came to be part of a policy world, what they experienced, and a sense of why things have occurred is all of interest. In reflecting on life history research for this paper I have considered how different types of insights can be gathered when analysing data. I use the categories of 'internal' insights and 'external' insights as 'soft' analytic frames in my research to make sense of data as it is analysed. Internal insights are insights about a process or element of the policy development process as narrated by an actor, for example how an actor participated in the production of a policy

document, or the launch of a government review. External insights relate to insights generated about social practice and habitus, how a person's identity in a space, and trajectory into that space has been socially constituted. People and organisations are part of a hierarchy of power relations, we can get a greater sense of the comparative power of social actors in a social field by understanding ethnographically where they 'fit into things'. Apposite is Pusey's (1991: 46–47) metaphor of the 'window':

> Social actors view the world through windows that are part of its structure - their actions are premised on what they see and, of course, what they see depends very much on how they and others have designed the building and which way the windows are facing.

In the case study excerpt below both internal and external insights emerge from the analysis of a life history account of a former New Zealand Treasury Secretary. 'Soft' framing means that insights can be separated out for consideration and re-embedded to synthesis in an analytic phase where comparisons are also made between actors across different spaces, and with reference to other materials containing ethnographic value be analysed as part of a policy worlds approach. Owing to the flexibility of the approach, and depending on the interests of the researcher there are many other dimensions life history research can shed light on that would otherwise be harder to grasp except through in-situ ethnography. In my research context an account of how actors experience time is of interest. Time in the policy process is socially constructed and bounded by processes - deadlines for review, government agendas, parliamentary timeframes, pressure to report to ministers - time is an actor in the policy process and life history interviews can be used

to make sense of the what in which time is structured across different actors. How time is ordered and experienced in particular spaces will differ across sites. Central agency time will be different than NGO time. Governing times of ruling parties, policy development processes, project commissioning, the preparation of reports, 'consulting' with stakeholders are all part of the time profile of bureaucrats - they are features of practice that play out over time. As Jenkins observes 'any adequate analysis of practice must, therefore, treat temporality as a central feature of its very nature' (Jenkins, 1992: 62). Mobility is a further area where life history research can draw forth insight by tracing how the movement of actors across national borders influences the transfer of ideas. Understanding how space shapes policy processes is a further area where life history interviewing may reveal insight, spaces and buildings may be demonstrated to work as actors in a policy space in line with the tenets of Actor Network Theory. While mobility of individuals has been considered (for example Larner and Laurie, 2010; Prince, 2016) in the context policy development, life history research has the potential to bring to light, from a lived perspective how personal experiences of mobility influence both policy development and career trajectories.

Social organisation and policy making

There is a broader sociological structuring of policy work, and power relations between actors that is needed to make sense of a policy world. How social power operates, with respect to actors in a policy world often does not significantly feature in critical policy literatures. And yet it is important. Access to positions in the higher bureaucracy, spaces in which discursive struggles play out, then get tendered as advice to ministers or drafting into law, are not open to all comers. They are exclusive places in which gatekeeping

strategies operate with respect to valorising forms of social and cultural capital. This is particularly the case in 'central agencies' (such as ministries of finance or central policy bureaus) which are held to be prestigious locations in hierarchies of public sector agencies. In my own area of research, the New Zealand policy making context, an aura of intellectual and technical excellence surrounds the Treasury, an agency which is both the manager of government finance and assessor (and arbiter) of policy proposals in the wider public sector (New Zealand Treasury, 2015). This is communicated explicitly as characterising the identity of the organisation in a recruitment video produced to target aspiring university graduates featured on the Treasury website:

> You get the chance to work with some of the best economic and public policy minds in New Zealand. At Treasury its all about evidence based policy – so you're really searching for the truth. You get to work across the Treasury – you don't get the opportunity anywhere else to work on large scale policy pieces that really make a difference to the New Zealand economy the people within it (New Zealand Treasury, 2014).

Both the notion that the Treasury is an exclusive location for the undertaking of intellectual work and the framing of that work as in pursuit of 'truth' are entry points into considering how social power shapes and structures the ways in which policy is made. The Treasury is a space for making policy decisions according to 'evidence', a practice aligned with identifying truth. Yet Bargh (2007: 14) points out that technocratic discourses frame neoliberal policies as objectively good and value-neutral – based on' technical and scientific 'facts' derived from nature'. Drawing in the New Zealand context

Bargh critiques such arguments by laying out how neoliberal policies displace the world views and practices of being inherent to indigenous cultures. Claims of 'truth' based on 'evidence based' policy enacted by the state are sites for ongoing struggles for decolonisation for indigenous people such as Maori in Aotearoa New Zealand (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012: 98). In the New Zealand context, then, the exercise of decision making in a 'cloistered' environment such as such as the Treasury has implications for political life in postcolonial societies. The idea that locations in a 'policy world' are stratified and exclusive, despite claims of powerful actors of working in 'the national interest' are far from new. C Wright Mills (Mills, 1956) observed a 'power elite' embedded within institutions of political and economic life in the United States collectively exercised power and influence that shaped the conditions of everyday life for all. 'Across the Tasman' Pusey (1991) characterised powerful Canberra senior civil servants, at work in that country's central agencies, as the 'switchmen of history' - able to make a 'nation building state change its mind' and embrace economic rationalism, displacing existing Keynesian policy settings. Pusey's method was to study the social backgrounds of those with their hand on the levers of power and to understand the 'window' from which they looked out upon Australian society. He found a 'grossly disproportionate number of young men from Australia's expensive schools are concentrated in some very specific locations, most notably the Treasury' and through survey data found analysis found a relationship between social background and political orientation - those at the top of the social hierarchy being three times more likely to support a 'new right' political agenda (Pusey, 1991: 4). Other scholars have directed attention to how power and influence is wielded in upper echelons of government, contrasting with accounts of the policy development as a hygienic process involving the deployment of technical expertise. In an

alarming example, Wedel (2004, 2011) explores how groups of coordinated individuals in the US have taken advantage of the spaces created by the privatization of public sector work. She uses the term ‘flex nets’ to “capture the members' facility for manoeuvring between government and private roles plus their skill at both relaxing the government's rules of accountability and businesses' codes of competition and at conflating state and private interests” (2004: B04). A further characteristic is how members move into different spaces in a shifting array of guises and modes be it in government, media, consultancy, think tanks, or lobbying organisations: ‘in doing so, they are continually working to further the shared agenda of the group’ (Wedel, 2004: B04). Wedel’s study of elite cliques emerged from observations made in her anthropological studies of Poland’s transition out of communism where officials often held multiple positions, maximising insider knowledge for gain and becoming ‘institutional nomads’ – loyal to others in their group rather than state institutions (2004: B04). While this is an extreme example (Wedel herself notes as much) the notion that networks, or at a smaller scale cliques with similar outlooks and loyalties exist within policy making apparatus is an important one. Kelsey (2015: 130–131) notes the ascendency of a ‘hybridised’ system of exercising public power in New Zealand has gone ‘relatively unnoticed’ – influence in policy development is wielded by corporates, consultants, think tanks as well as officials and politicians. Much has been written with respect to the conflicts of interest that may arise from such arrangements (see Hodge and Bowman, 2006). At a more general level of practice Mosse (2011), for example, finds the construction and deployment of ‘professional identities’ (professional as rational, technical actor) within the Department for International Development (DfID) was at odds with actual social practices organising work which involved processes of gaining influence and navigating internal politics to

secure tenure or career progression. Mosse's account is a notable exception in the literature on policy development that tends to not engage with the social mechanisms that determine who inhabits important spaces in a policy field, how certain values are strategically embodied by actors in these spaces (obscuring an array of practices that contradict or counteract the embodiment). His account describes how a sociology of how influence is produce, embodied, and experienced is essential for understanding how policy is made. Mosse's work is an in-situ ethnographic project,

'Economic Rationalism in Wellington'

In the remaining sections of the paper I explain my use of life history research in the context of a 'policy worlds'. My area of focus is the emergence of a substantial shift in policy direction in the way public services and infrastructure are delivered in New Zealand. By way of background, marketisation policies have reshaped numerous areas of government provision of infrastructure and services over the past decade. The introduction of markets and market actors into previously state organised areas of provision represents a new wave of enmeshing public and private activities in areas of state activity. Far from being a 'settled' site following an earlier period of neoliberal transformation in the 1980s and 1990s, which the *Economist* described as 'Chile without the gun' (Kelsey, 2008: 9), New Zealand's public services are a of ongoing restructure and reform. Examples of new forms of marketisation in areas of state activity include – but are not limited to: the development and use of public private partnerships (PPPs) in infrastructure development in the transport sector; the large-scale transfer of publicly held housing stock into private hands through the 'State Housing Transformation Programme' administered by the Treasury; the use of PPPs in school building and facilities

management, as well as the introduction of Partnership Schools Kura Hourua (charter schools); the extensive use of PPPs and service contracts in the corrections sector; increasing use of service outsourcing and contracting, notably by District Health Boards in catering and laundry services. While different models and configurations are referred to in the list above, these examples are linked by the way in which state provision and oversight is now enmeshed with market actors in the production and distribution of services and infrastructure. A further link is the role in which the New Zealand Treasury – something of a 'super ministry' is present across a large body of the reforms. As it did in the 1980s and 1990s the Treasury remains a key site for the (re)organisation of New Zealand's welfare state as the agency has a broad policy oversight role across the public sector. My work builds upon a history of discussion in New Zealand about the significance of key personnel, as agents for the promotion and promulgation of economic reform, as a significant factor in New Zealand's earlier neoliberal turn (Jesson, 1989, 1992, Kelsey, 1995, 1999a, 2015). Yet despite the identification of key personnel as pivotal agents, this point has been noted but unexamined in much depth. With many of the same personnel of the 1980s/1990s in positions of influence and with Treasury continuing to feature as an important site of influence understanding the milieu of policy actors is important. I am in the process of using of life history research in the context of a 'policy worlds' approach to examine the emergence of a new, substantial shift in policy direction. My project involves life history interviews with public servants in 'central' and 'operational' agencies, politicians, consultants, business people, and Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) staff as well as analysis of texts to understand why and how a new turn to marketisation has occurred. The project remains in progress, in line with Lewis's (2008) comments on the time consuming nature of recruiting and interviewing as well as

the analytic work involved in producing knowledge. Insights will be presented in subsequent papers. However, included as 'appendix one' is an excerpt from an analysis of a life history interview of Dr Graham Scott, a former Secretary of the New Zealand Treasury, international policy consultant, and a current member of the New Zealand Productivity Commission (a government think tank). Scott remains an intellectual figure in the New Zealand public sector, and his work history and trajectory is of interest given his involvement in New Zealand's neoliberal reforms of the 1980s and 1990s through to his recent contribution to the Productivity Commission's (2012) recommendations to open up social housing provision to competition. The interview itself was conducted by a fellow economist and former Treasury Deputy Secretary Peter Bushnell. The interview was substantial, running to 10400 words (20 pages) and was featured in the August 2013 edition of *Asymmetric Information*, the publicly available newsletter of the New Zealand Association of Economists (NZAE). While the interview was conducted by a fellow 'insider' the material has significant value for understanding the social context of the New Zealand Treasury. Using framework outlined earlier in the paper, I present 'internal' and 'external' insights in the analysis below as a way of presenting an exemplar for reference.

Conclusion

As noted in the call for papers, the purpose of the panel session is to explore how interpretive methods allow us to better understand complex policy worlds and issues. In describing how life history research may be used in a 'policy worlds' context I have placed the social practices of actors, across space and time as a central site for policy research. Life history research represents an underutilised approach to further understanding how policy making process work in practice, and to give an account of the

way in which they are *lived* by actors on a daily basis. The approach also opens up a window on how spaces in a policy field interact with broader social dynamics of social structure. While using the approach is time and labour intensive, and in a policy worlds context represents one approach among many avenues the potential for life history materials to assist with demystifying policy processes is great.

Appendix one – life history analysis excerpt

Dr Graham Scott

Early life

Dr Scott was 72 at the time the interview featured. Importantly the interview was conducted by a colleague, Peter Bushnell, himself a former Deputy Secretary of the Treasury with whom Scott had collaborated with while at the Treasury (see Scott et al., 1990). Little is mentioned in the interview about Scott's earlier life, however Shallcrass (2006: 132) notes Scott attended Christ College – an expensive and exclusive school for boys in Christchurch. Scott attended the University of Canterbury, initially enrolling in an accountancy degree but soon switched to economics as he '*really loved it*'. He credits his decision to become a professional economist to the intellectual milieu of the Department where classical thinkers such as Smith, Ricardo, Mill, Marshall and Marx were taught ('it was terrific grounding in the kind of economics that had preceded the marginal revolution and the introduction of mathematics and econometrics'). Indeed Scott relates an ambivalence towards econometrics. Economics as a realm of ideas and debate shine through in this account. He notes the influence of Paul Samuelson and Milton Friedman on 'my generation of economists', referencing the debates that occurred between the two scholars as 'very important to all economists at the time'. Scott departed New Zealand and attended Duke University in North Carolina in the late 1960s, the process by which he was able to do so was not expanded upon. He describes his intellectual development in Duke context: *'economists I was very influenced by…were the American Institutional Economists'*. Douglass North, a key thinker of 'New

Institutional Economics' (NIE), is referenced as a scholar 'who I came to follow a lot for the rest of my career'. As is Oliver Williamson, another NIE thinker, whom Scott describes as having written an '*astonishing book on the institutions of capitalism, tracing back to it antecedents historically and again pushing simple ideas deeply to throw light into the nature of the capitalist economy'*. The connections to North and Williamson are significant given Craig's (2006) discussion of the incorporation of NIE assumptions in the reform of the New Zealand public sector overseen by the Treasury in the 1980s. Craig notes that Peter Gorringe, a senior Treasury analyst and collaborator with Scott (see Scott and Gorringe, 1989 for their overview of the ideational provenance of Treasury's public sector reforms) was acquainted with many NIE figures, including North. Oliver Williamson travelled to Wellington and gave a key note address at the launch of a book, edited by prominent economists, posthumously celebrating Gorringe's work at the Treasury (Gorringe, 2001; New Zealand Association of Economists, 2001). The influence on Scott and others at the Treasury by North American scholars, particularly NIE scholars can be understood as strong and long lasting, and worthy of greater scholarly attention. Scott describes his time at Duke corresponding with an ascendant economics discipline - scholars such as North and Gary Becker 'showed that the economic method in the United States tradition would be pushed into all corners of life and society'. It wasn't just academic pursuits that occupied him in North Carolina – he recalls becoming politically active in the context of the Vietnam war and the civil rights movement, and describes his younger self at that time as being a '*liberal in the US sense of the word*'.

On the Treasury and New Zealand's neo-liberal turn

Scott comments that Treasury's briefing to the incoming Labour government in 1984, published in book format under the title *Economic Management* (Treasury, 1984), was a culmination of thinking that dated back as far as 1978, with clear portents from 1981. *Economic Management* contained proposals for radically restructuring the New Zealand economy and welfare state (for full account see Kelsey, 1995, 1999b). Scott traces elements of the policy proposals back to a colleague, Noel Lough, '*to whom I really owe my entry into the Treasury*'. According to Scott, Lough '*had spent most of his career concerned about the nature of economic policy in New Zealand and under the Muldoon administration a misalignment of policy instruments. He asked me to head Economics II with a mandate to rethink the Treasury advice on economic policy'.* These observations form Scott describe the Treasury habitus as one where sustained intellectual labour about the structure of the economy was expected and encouraged, with space available for policy thinking that represented a significantly different approach held by the sitting government. 'Economics II' constituted a think-tank within the Treasury, a new space with a specific mandate to 're-think' the New Zealand economy. Scott recounts that '*by the 1984 came along* [the year of the snap election] *a considerable investment had been made*'. Scott recounts that despite the proposals in *Economic Management* being read as a 'secretive' agenda upon its public release '*pretty much all of it had been exposed to the outgoing National Party….so it really wasn't the hidden kind of document that Treasury enemies have attempted to make it'.* It is a reasonable observation, however, that while government ministers may have received (and rejected) the advice, little public knowledge existed of the extent of Treasury's 're-think'. Scott comments too on the

provenance of the idea for the policy proposals contained in *Economic Management* to be published in book form:

As far as it being a document, I had been influenced by a man called T.K. (Ken) Whitaker who had been the Secretary of the Department of Finance in Ireland at a time when the Irish economy was dead in the water. He had the bottle to oversee the writing of a document on economic development. I had a copy of it once. Ken went onto be the head of the central bank in Ireland, and was even at one stage mooted as a candidate for presidency. But he'd had guts to stand up and write this document in what must have been very difficult times. That's where I got the idea, really, that instead of just delivering a set of little papers into a government on one thing or another, why don't we put this thinking together, in a single document. And of course at the time, we gave it to in-coming government we never imagined that it was going to get published. We gave it the title of Economic Management *because we thought the way which the economy was being managed was wrong; and the central idea was that the instruments of economics were being targeting on the wrong variables.*

The way in which Scott transferred an Irish idea into the New Zealand context speaks to both his intellectual knowledge of the world of economics beyond New Zealand, as well as Treasury's context as a space that was authorised to consider, and direct the future of the nation.

ENDS.

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