P02 / Making Sense of Complex Policy Worlds Using Interpretive Methods

Topic : POLICY DISCOURSE AND CRITICAL POLICY RESEARCH

Chair : Prudence R Brown (University of Queensland)

Second Chair : Michael Orsini (University of Ottawa)

Third Chair : Warner Sarah (University of Queensland)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

There is increasing recognition that policy institutions are complex and studying structure and culture on their own is not enough – scholars need to understand the totality of the 'policy world' within which agents operate. The concept of a policy world draws on Shore and Wright (2011) who saw policies as having complex 'social lives' and 'agency', both shaped by interactions with actors and agents as well as shaping them (3). It also draws on Glynos and Howarth (2007) who see policies enacted within a policy regime as well as within an established system of social and political practices. As such, policy worlds are at heart radically contingent and open up ambiguous spaces in which actors and agents compete for influence.

Mainstream scientific methods are often reductionist, subordinating real-world complexity. If we are to be able to make sense of complex policy worlds, policy analysis needs to embrace the larger context, including the political. Interpretive methods provide the means required to delve into the complex, mediated and ambiguous realities within which policies are developed and implemented.

Interpretivist scholars are interested in the practical ways that policy practitioners recognise and manage the complexity that confronts them. As such, much interpretive analysis concentrates on close, micro-level interactions and contextualised self-interpretations. The challenge is to scale up established interpretive methodologies to make sense of 'policy worlds' in ways that consider the complexities at a larger scope of policy analysis, but which still express the variety of conflicting interpretations of actors.

References:

Glynos, Jason, and David R. Howarth. 2007. *Logics of critical explanation in social and political theory*. Vol. 26. New York, NY: Routledge.

Shore, Cris, and Susan Wright. 2011. "Conceptualising Policy: Technologies of Governance and the Politics of Visibility." In *Policy worlds: anthropology and the analysis of contemporary power*, edited by Cris Shore, Susan Wright and Davide Però, 1-25. New York: Berghahn Books.

CALL FOR PAPERS

Interpretivist scholars are interested in the practical ways that policy practitioners recognise and manage the complexity that confronts them, how they interpret actions and discourses, and contribute to their formulation in turn. Interpretive policy analysis has been dominated by close, micro-level interactions and contextualised self-interpretations. The challenge for interpretivists is to scale up interpretive methodologies to make sense of 'policy worlds' of a much greater scope, but which nonetheless express the variety of conflicting interpretations of actors.

This panel seeks papers using interpretive methods to apprehend policy worlds. Papers are sought which make theoretical, methodological or empirical contributions to the extension of interpretive methods to a more holistic analysis of the complex, mediated and ambiguous realities of policy worlds. This might include comparative analyses of discourse across policy fields or countries, large-scale interpretations of policy worlds beyond micro-level ethnographies, or interpretive accounts of the state and other political institutions. We welcome contributions from interpretive scholars who draw on intersectional approaches to policy, or approaches that foreground intersections of race, gender, class, and ability.

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Session 1

Thursday, June 27th 08:00 to 10:00 (MB 3.285)

Discussants

Michael Orsini (University of Ottawa)

Warner Sarah (University of Queensland)

Ethical critique of a supported housing policy

Nicole Shepherd (University of Queensland)

Ethical critique is a promising analytical approach for those using interpretive methods to understand complex policy worlds. It involves examining social practices and critiquing the values underlying them in order to open up a discursive space to develop something new. In this paper, I outline an ethical critique of a supported housing program for people living with serious mental illness in Queensland, Australia. I draw on interview data collected as part of a 14-year follow up of clients on the program. The policy was framed using a fantasmatic logic where clients would become autonomous, self-actualising people whose need for ongoing care would diminish over time. This was not found to be the case, as many people felt lonely with few social contacts outside the paid support hours. An alternative normative framework that promotes justice for people living with serious mental illness in terms of relationality as well as autonomy opens up new avenues for policy.

Making-up the National- Globalisation in Australia’s school education policy

Warner Sarah (University of Queensland)

Global policy assemblages, global policy discourse, global knowledges policy transfers and policy borrowing have all been used to describe the increasing globalisation in education policy. Ball calls this activity ‘global policyspeak’ (2017, 2). Captured by this global policyspeak are ideas such as school choice, the importance of literacy and numeracy and a concentration on lifelong learning and even the importance of equity. Materially the work of international agencies such as the OECD, World Bank and UNESCO have further contributed to global education policy convergence. In many countries this trend is understood as a threat to the national education systems, which have been a key activity of the nation-state. However, in Australia it has had the perverse effect of creating a national school education system, where none has previously existed. School education in Australia has been the responsibility of the state governments within its federated system. This paper uses an interpretive lens to consider how the national scale is legitimised in policy documents while invoking the global and considers what this means for the category of the state using the experience in Australia as a case study.

Ball, Stephen J. 2017. Education policy : major themes in education: Abingdon, Oxon

New York, NY : Routledge.

Social Housing Reform in New Zealand: An Interpretive Perspective

Jordan King (University of Auckland)

New Zealand's centrally administered housing programme for low income and vulnerable citizens ('State Housing') has been a core part of the welfare state since the 1930s. Recent reforms have transformed the programme into a new 'quasi-market' system where the government provider now competes with community housing providers for tenants and funding. Scholars have questioned the economics of the reforms (Dykes 2016) and their efficacy in a time of increasing housing scarcity (Howden-Chapman & Baker, 2014). However, little attention has focused on the provenance of the reforms. My paper addresses why and how the reform agenda was pursued by the New Zealand government with special attention paid to the interactions of actors inside and outside of the state. The 'policy worlds' approach outlined by Shore and Wright (1997, 2011) provides an interpretivist perspective for analysing the myriad strands and connections of people, ideas, and spaces that interact in a policy field with the 'aim to deconstruct policy in order to reveal patterns and processes in the organisation of power in society' (Shore and Wright, 2011: 4). This necessitates tracing key ideas and arguments across multiple sites of activity through the analysis of materials with ethnographic value (including documents, interviews, newspaper articles, parliamentary proceedings). In my paper I apply this approach to examine the use of narratives and modes of political organisation used by key actors inside and outside of government in the development of the reform agenda. I argue that the political claims of a fledgling NGO housing sector seeking a greater role in the housing system elided comfortably with a Treasury and Cabinet agenda to consider new models while seeking overall to minimise the fiscal impact of the existing programme. The paper sheds new light on a major area of social policy reform in New Zealand through the use of interpretive methods.

The intersubjective creation of the Youth Protection Act (LPJ) 2007 amendments meaning: sensemaking and sensegiving processes

Naïma Bentayeb (ENAP)

This study focused on the evaluation of the implementation of the Youth Protection Act (LPJ) 2007 amendments in three Youth Centres (CJ) in Quebec. We were interested in the implementation as a process during which the meaning of a policy is constructed by the actors engaged in this process. We examined how this process does or does not lead to a change in their practices and eventually in their understanding and behavior (Spillane, Reiser & Reimer, 2002; Yanow, 2000). We opted for "sensemaking" (Denis et al., 2009; Weick, 1995) and "sensegiving" (Jeong & Brower, 2008) theories to focus not only on the behavior (action) of the actors involved in implementation, but also on the constructive process which led to this action - meanings and how these meanings are communicated. Sensegiving and sensemaking are two interrelated, continuous and perpetual processes (Maitlis, 2005; Stensaker et al., 2008). Specifically, we attempted to respond to this research question: Beyond the observation of the gap between design and implementation of public policies, how to understand this gap in an interpretive perspective? The study is a qualitative secondary analysis of primary data (Heaton, 2004). The evaluator adopted a hermeneutical phenomenology perspective. The phenomenological element is descriptive and account for the organizing experiences and principles that give shape and meaning to the lived world (Kvale 1996, Osborne 1994, Polkinghorne 1983). The second element is hermeneutic, and activates interpretive historical meanings and individual and social developments (Laverty, 2003).
Methodologically, we opted for a research strategy based on multiple, instrumental studies (Stake, 2003; Yin, 2003). The data consisted on individual interviews, focus groups, online questionnaire. Several levels of actors, representatives of all the structures of the three youth centers (CJ), participated in the research: stakeholders, department heads and directors. In all, 159 people participated in an individual or a focus group and 384 responded to the questionnaire. In addition, as each document is a representation of the negotiated self-perception of the organization, we analyzed more than 200 documents (departmental and administrative documents; organizational documentation; the DPJ's provincial results as well as the annual management reports of the three CJs; briefs tabled to the parliamentary committee; and press article). The implementation operates in a context of exchanges and interactions. The use of the sensemaking and sensegiving theories allowed us to consider the flow of information from the political towards the administrative during the implementation process. The analysis insisted on how the policy practitioners recognize, interpret and manage the flow of clues they receive in a complex and an interrelated world of challenges and constraints. We were interested in the mutual influence of different hierarchical level actors and how they succeed -or not- the trajectory of objectified creation towards the intersubjective creation of a collective policy meaning.
References

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