T08P10 / Making Sense of Complex Policy Worlds Using Interpretive Methods

Topic : T08 / Policy Discourse and Critical Policy Research

Chair : Prudence R Brown (University of Queensland)

Second Chair : Nick Turnbull (University of Manchester)

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*. 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.

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Session 1 Making sense of policy worlds - from a practice perspective

Thursday, June 29th 10:30 to 12:30 (Block B 5 - 6)

Discussants

Hal Colebatch (UNSW Australia)

Harsh Mittal (Birla Institute of Technology and Science)

An insider's critical perspective: Studying discourses, policies and practices of peacebuilding in Myanmar's transition

Stefan Bächtold (Monash University, Malaysia Campus)

A range of different actors have been seeking to influence peacebuilding policies in Myanmar since the country embarked on a transition to democracy: Government, military, ethnic armed organisations, but also bi- and multilateral donors, international and local NGOs, as well as political activists are engaged in a complex field of political struggle to create legitimacy for their 'solutions'. How to make sense of such a highly contested and complex policy environment?

This paper argues that it is best understood by conceptually linking the analysis of discourses on the global level with the study of policies and practices in a local context. The concept of power/knowledge networks or dispositifs that tie together discourses, policies and practices is central to this approach: It allows grasping the technocratic and de-politicising force of international discourses and their standards of 'good practice', while being sensitive to how these are influenced and shaped in turn by the interpretation, practices, and resistance of various local actors. What emerges is a nuanced picture of how certain policies and practices in Myanmar come into being and are seen as legitimate, while others are not; underlining their inherent contingency.

Drawing on a concluded doctoral research project that used a combination of Foucauldian discourse analysis and ethnographic methods, this paper offers a thorough reflection on the potentials and limits of such a framework to gain insights in complex and highly contested policy contexts. A specific focus therein is the discussion of the specific positionality of the researcher, who in this case is part of this policy world, rather than an external observer.

Mental health policy for severe and complex needs: the utility of an interpretive approach in understanding program implementation.

Jennifer Smith-Merry (University of Sydney)

James Gillespie (Menzies Centre for Health Policy, University of Sydney.)

In 2011 the Australian Federal Labor government led by Julia Gillard announced a plan to implement a new mode of mental health support for people with severe and complex mental ill-health: Partners in Recovery. This AU$549.8 million program was to be implemented within Labor's flagship reorganisation of primary care – the 61 Medicare Locals, implemented Australia wide. The government stated that the aim of the program was to address a mental health and social support system where "severe and persistent mental illness is not adequately integrated or coordinated, and people with complex needs often fall through the resulting gaps".

Partners in Recovery was to be led in each region by a consortia of self-organised government and

non-government organisations who tendered for the program and were funded based on level of socio economic disadvantage (there were no clear figures beyond estimates of the size of the target audience). The program centred around a new workforce role, the Support Facilitator – a generic brokerage case management role without mental health training who would meet with individuals to determine their needs and then identify individualised supports which would meet those needs. Funding was available to provide supports not available through government funded services.

Shortly after the tenders were awarded the Gillard government lost power and it was announced that while the program was continuing Medicare Locals would not, thereby complicating the implementation with new organisational boundaries and dis-ease about governance arrangements.

Our study took place in two regions in Western Sydney with high rates of mental ill-health and social disadvantage. Using interpretive methods we conducted 99 interviews at three time-points over a three year period in order to understand the experience of implementing the program within this complex policy setting. An interpretive approach was a natural fit for this purpose as it allowed for us to shift our lens to an understanding of what the program meant for those involved in its implementation, how it appeared to the program's external stakeholders and the practical difficulties involved in implementing the policy.

In this paper we focus in on the Support Facilitator. We draw on interviews with the Support Facilitators themselves and those stakeholder interviews in which Support Facilitators were spoken about to provide an understanding of how this key role was experienced by those performing its implementation and those interacting with them. As the Support Facilitator is so key in the Partners in Recovery program this has allowed us to understand the progress of the policy implementation in a way that statistical data about rates of service use and other outputs will not.

Our results show early difficulties in program implementation related to establishing a new role and program within an existing sector. This was followed by a period of program stability, which resulted in systemic change beyond the bounds of the program. This period of stability gave way to instability as concerns about the ongoing program funding, changed consortium arrangements and new policies, primarily the National Disability Insurance Scheme, complicated the program implementation.

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

Jordan King (University of Auckland)

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. On the question of method Shore and Wright relate that: "Anthropology does not offer a ready-made tool kit of methods that can be picked up and used instrumentally; rather, it is about the acquisition of an ethnographic sensibility, that is, a critical and questioning disposition that treats the familiar as strange and one that generates what we might call the anthropologist's habitus…From this perspective, every experience, encounter, conversation, document or public event provides ethnographic material" (2011: 15). 'Life history' methods are a versatile set of approaches centred around collecting accounts of personal experience relating to a period of an individual's life. Their use in generating ethnographic material has value with respect to the practice Reinhold (Reinhold, 1994; Reinhold and Wright, 2011) terms 'studying through' in a policy field. 'Life history' methods, according to Raewyn Connell, can be employed to "build a picture of social structure and social dynamics with an emotional depth unreachable through other research methods" (Connell, 2010, p. 55). Ken Plummer, a leader in life history approaches states the method is effective due to its 'triple concern with biography, history, and structure' (Plummer, 2001). My paper aims to demonstrate 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 reflections, emotions, and ambiguities which may emerge from a life history interview have the potential to offer compelling and useful insights into the way a particular policy field is both structured and experienced. The possible uses and benefits of utilising 'life history' methods in line with a 'policy worlds' approach will be explored by drawing on perspectives and insights from my current 'life history' study of civil servants, private sector consultants, and business people engaged in the development and introduction of new forms of marketisation in key public services areas in New Zealand. In demonstrating the value 'life history' method has offered in the context of my study I will move to build a case for advancing their use for those undertaking interpretive studies of policy fields.

Failure of policy or of policy actors? Using the Logics of Critical Explanation approach to understand barriers to change in Australian remote Indigenous Policy.

Prudence R Brown (University of Queensland)

Australian governments have been trying for many years to introduce more participatory approaches to increase Indigenous ownership of problems and solutions, particularly in remote areas. The largely failed attempts in recent years have led to repeated incremental policy shifts. However, evaluations have concluded that more effort also needs to be made to improve the capacity of public servants to work in the new ways asked of them.

New approaches are not implemented on a blank canvass. They are imposed on well established, but not so well understood, policy worlds. I suggest that understanding the complexities of the existing policy world provides important insights into the ongoing resistance to attempts to introduce new traditions. This in turn provides insights into the capacities needed in policy actors asked to implement them.

I use the Logics of Critical Explanation (LCE) approach to analyze a recent national trial in remote Indigenous Australia aimed, in part, at a more participatory approach to development efforts. I characterise the remote Indigenous 'policy world' using three explanatory 'logics' which focus on the ontological assumptions, norms and narratives that sustain the policy practices complicit in the repeated failure to introduce more participatory approaches.

In so doing I unravel the complexity of the interplay between existing traditions and new ways of working. In particular, I identify the logics which are used to neutralise challenges to the existing policy world, and which assist in the maintenance of 'the way we do things around here'. I suggest that identifying the ways that the policy regime effectively authorises, to a surprising extent, resistance to change is the first step towards creating new bureaucratic norms conducive to participatory approaches.

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Session 2 Making sense of policy worlds - from a policy perspective

Thursday, June 29th 13:30 to 15:30 (Block B 5 - 6)

Discussants

Prudence R Brown (University of Queensland)

Preeti Raghunath (University of Sheffield)

The Ideational Framework of Public Policy

Atif Butt (United Nations Environment Programme)

Study of public policy is incomplete without the consideration of the context in which the policy decisions are made. Existing theories of public policy, however, fall short of capturing the politics and environment of policymaking in developing countries and characterise features such as those represented by the United States or the western industrialised countries. Surprisingly, there is hardly anything substantial contributed towards building a theory of public policy for developing countries. By taking the case of Pakistan,the research sets the objective of filling-in this theoretical gap through analysis of social-sector policymaking. The research employs the analytical construct of ideational institutionalism, which offers the flexibility of context-specific examination of public policy making. Within the overarching paradigm of new institutionalism, the research develops conceptual clarity on types and origin of ideas and their role in public policy outcomes. With the help of discourse analysis, the research examines basic claims of ideational institutionalism by extending the frameworks of Peter Hall and John Campbell as an ideational framework of public policy for understanding the mechanism through which ideas originate and affect public policy outcomes.

By applying the case study approach and qualitatively studying the three social-sector legislations in Pakistan, the research brings out several key findings to substantiate the enormous promise ideational institutionalism holds for studying policymaking process in countries of grey-zone. The research also sets the agenda for future research for applying the ideational framework in other policymaking contexts for its analytical generalisation.

Ideational and material factors influencing policy change: are complex policies doomed to fail?

Antonija Mrsic (Governmental authority Republic of Croatia)

The paper is about analysing policy change from an ontological perspective situated in an institutional context of plurality of ideas and actors. The research question is how the existence of conflicting value-ideological positions influence power relations and policy dynamics, by looking into the constitutive role of the ideational factors of a policy issue with its inherent meanings and beliefs that actors have; and the material factors that entail preferences and interests of policy actors.
The research is "problem-driven" (Glynos, Howarth, Norval and Speed, 2009) done as a case study of innovation policy in Croatia in the context of process of Europeanisation of national policy (Croatia became a member state of the EU in 2013, bringing a new dynamics in policy making process) and financial crisis of the state budget. It is possible to track various external influences on the definition and scope of innovation policy, which says about the origins of the discourse, opening ambiguous spaces in which they compete for jurisdiction. Hypothesis is developed, that the change happens if there are adequate incentives for the actors to take on the new meanings and new ideas on how to define certain policy issues, related to specific discourse's power properties. The power in this case stems from the availability of the EU funding resources, so the political change that happens is dominated by the most powerful discourse in that respect. The paper demonstrates that innovation policy is a

"complex policy world" due to plurality of meanings assigned to it by different actors involved. The empirical evidence show an ongoing existence of subjective definitions and a certain level of discontent by the individual actors whose ideational logic has not been successful in arriving to the new national policy agenda, which potentially poses a threat in achieving policy integration and implementation. Thus, the challenge is to re-assess what innovation policy actually means. It can be suggested that complex policies are doomed to fail if they depend on one meaning and are counting on the wider reception of that one meaning.

Methodology is interpretative, a combination of different discursive analysis approaches (IPA, CDA). The level of analysis is speech, text and interaction. Material and data is gathered on the basis of semi-structured interviews with state policy actors involved, analysis of policy documents and discursive practice.

The paper fits the panel topic because its conceptual framework is found in the interpretive methods: it assess the three logical layers of policy processes suggested by Glynos and Howarth (2003) and in particular on how these logics affects policy change; it approaches the topic via construction and dissemination of ideas within an institutional context and takes them as constitutive elements in the process of policy-making which is situated in the theory of discursive institutionalism (Schmidt, 2002, 2008, 2011) and uses the theoretical model of "multiple streams" (Kingdon, 2014), which offers an explanation of the processes that lead to policy changes, especially in terms of complexity and the existence of more ideas on public policy issues.

How do the policy subject of education policy in Australia 'appropriate' policy?

Warner Sarah (University of Queensland)

How do the policy subject of education policy in Australia 'appropriate' policy?

Education Policy in Australia has followed a similar path to many other countries, and introduced decentralising policy, which encourages school choice whilst implementing local and international testing systems which rank performance by students, school, state and country. These changes have the capacity to reorder the way education is governed in Australia. This paper examines the governmental programs visible in policy documents related to school education policy and the experience of students and their caregivers, on whom the policies are enacted. However, in examining policy level documents and the experience of students there are conceptual problems in bridging the gap between top down policy and bottom up student experience. In this paper I draw on the concept of 'appropriation', where those who experience policy make aspects of policy their own (Nielsen 2011). This concept is illustrated in the interaction between the policy created, the policy implemented and the ways the policy subject use the policy. In this paper I explore the way policy subjects 'appropriate' from the policy trends in education and 'make their own' policy. This 'appropriation' offers both potential for resistance, but also acceptance of policy trends. I suggest that the ways policy subjects 'accept' policy may be as interesting as the ways they 'reject' it.

Nielsen, Gritt B. 2011. "Peopling Policy: On Conflicting subjectivities of Fee Paying Students." In Policy worlds anthropology and the analysis of contemporary power, edited by Cris Shore, Susan Wright and Davide Pero. New York: New York : Berghahn Books.

Policy representations in Czech social policy: How to speak about poverty without inequalities

Karel Cada (University of Economics Prague)

Since the 1990s, discourses and narratives on poverty and social exclusion have been extensively studied (e.g., Hirschman 1991; Fraser & Gordon 1994; O'Connor 2001; Levitas 2005; Schram 2012). In the paper, Carol Bacchi's (2009) approach to analysing public policy is used. Her approach, stemmed from studies of governmentality (Foucault 1991; Miller, Rose 1990; Dean 1999), has been tested and refined over the past decade. Bacchi's approach is focused on the following questions: (1) what are the prevailing representation of the social problem; (2) what presuppositions or assumptions underlies these representations; (3) how have these representations come about; (4) what is left unproblematic in these problem representations; (5) what effects are produced by these representations; and (6) how and where have these representations been produced, disseminated and defended. This approach is used to identify dominant media and policy representations. The paper covered the period from the beginning of 2006 to the end of 2015 and it is based upon media and policy representation of poverty and social exclusion in the Czech Republic. Based upon media research, key policy proposals and legal documents were identified. We created maps of key policy events. For each event, we identified crucial actors and texts they had produced. The paper identified three dominant axis for poverty representations in policy discourse: (1) spatial and non-spatial representations of poverty, (2) cultural and economic representations of poverty and (3) individualistic and systematic representations of poverty. Spatial representations of poverty are seen as a dominant mode of social policies in post-socialist context. These representations are strongly presented in policy documents, they are associated with cultural elements and closely connected with the European structural funds implementations. Spatial representations of poverty allow

policy makers to speak about poverty and social exclusion as pathological categories and to be silent about conditions of social inequalities in society as a whole.