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POSTSTRUCTURAL POLICY ANALYSIS

A Guide to Practice

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PART I

Asking New Policy Questions

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Abstract The Introduction articulates how a poststructural approach to policy analysis provides an important vehicle for questioning how governing takes place. It begins by sketching the broad parameters of a poststructural approach as a form of critical analysis that allows a refreshing skepticism toward the full range of things commonly associated with policy: policy itself, the knowledges that support policy and policy proposals, as well as conventional forms of policy analysis. The implication of this form of critical analysis for policy work is explained—how a poststructural approach encourages policy workers to reflect on their own role in governing and to engage in the productive and political practices of interrogating, theorizing, and resisting. The Introduction also sets out the structure of the book.

Keywords poststructuralism · policy analysis · policy work · Foucault · government · governmentality · policy anthropology · policy sociology · WPR approach

This book targets a wide audience—all those influenced by the ways in which governing takes place; in other words, everyone! More specifically, it is directed to those involved in policy development, policy-making, and policy analysis, and those studying these topics. The poststructural perspective it offers encourages policy workers and policy analysts to ask novel and challenging questions about the roles they play in policy development

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and how they do their work. In this Introduction, the emphasis is on what a poststructural approach can bring to policy analysis. How is policy thought about differently through a poststructural lens? What is gained from a poststructural perspective in the policy domain?

Poststructuralism is not a singular theory. Still it is possible to identify some broad parameters of a poststructural approach. There is, in general, a questioning of Enlightenment assumptions concerning reason, emancipation, science and progress, and disquiet regarding connections between this thinking and social inequality. Attention is directed to the heterogeneous practices, in particular the knowledge practices, that produce hierarchical and inegalitarian forms of rule. By emphasizing a plurality of practices, it becomes possible to insist that the realities we live are contingent, open to challenge and change. Because things could be otherwise, the firming up of particular social arrangements is seen to involve politics, used here in an expansive sense to mean the active shaping or making of the taken for granted.

The emphasis on heterogeneity and contingency offers a refreshing skepticism about the full range of "things" usually associated with policy, including policy itself. Rather than essences, "things" are "done" or "made", constituted, or brought into being. It follows that "things" commonly treated as entities (e.g., "organizations", "institutions", "the economy", "nation-states"), can also be "undone" or "unmade". Similarly, political "subjects" are understood to be emergent or in process, shaped in ongoing interactions with discourses and other practices, rather than founding or unchanging types of being who possess a fixed human essence or nature. Numerous concepts prove useful in making these arguments, though these can be drawn upon selectively: discourse, subjectification, practices, power-knowledge, governmentality, enactment, performativity, social construction, contestation, reflexivity, among others. Key concepts are introduced in Chapter 3.

While poststructuralism has been extremely influential across the humanities and social sciences, in the field of policy research and analysis it occupies a less well-articulated and more contested position. This gap, we suggest, needs to be addressed. This book aims to provide a succinct and accessible overview of what it means to analyze policy from a Foucault-influenced poststructural perspective, as elaborated in subsequent chapters. It presents a case for why it is important to undertake this form of critical analysis by showing the value of rethinking policy development through a poststructural lens.

A starting point for these reflections is that, as Wendy Brown (1998) suggests, we live in societies "saturated" with policy. From the moment we get up in the morning until we go bed—and even in bed—a panoply of legislative rules and regulations shape what we do and influence how we act. Going further, a poststructural perspective highlights how these rules and regulations bring into play a wide range of professional and "expert" knowledges that have a significant role in how we are governed and in producing the kinds of "subject" we are encouraged to become.

This use of knowledges in the plural signals the skepticism mentioned above—the premises and proposals associated with disciplines, including political science, psychology, epidemiology, social work, anthropology, and so on, are seen as *contingent* historical creations, human constructions, that need to be interrogated rather than enshrined as "truth". This kind of approach can be unsettling. Seeing knowledges as constructed or "made" can dislodge some of the certainties and orthodoxies upon which conventional policy approaches are based. Consider, for example, Sophie Watson's (2000: 73) interrogation of her own discipline, social policy: "in Foucauldian terms social policy is a highly normative discipline which constructs ideal models of society based on notions of social justice which disguise the concrete functioning of power". Yet it is precisely this perspective that enables her to begin to see the complex and contradictory effects apparently benign policies may have. The skepticism poststructuralism brings to knowledges and other "things" is signaled through the use of what are called scare quotes, such as we have inserted. Indeed, wherever we fear that the contingency of a term is not immediately visible we will place it in quotation marks to make it so, e.g., "subjects", "objects", "places", and "problems".[1]

In a poststructural understanding, government involves more than conventional legislative institutions and political parties. It is broader even than civil society and social movements. It includes numerous sites, agencies, and "ways of knowing" that interrelate in important ways to shape social rules. Foucault proposed the term *government* be defined, in general, to mean the "conduct of conduct" (Gordon 1991: 2). In this broader understanding, government refers to any form of activity that aims to shape, guide, or affect the conduct of people. Government can concern how people monitor or regulate their own conduct, how interpersonal relations are guided and controlled, as well as the state-generated rules, regulations, provisions, and punishments we usually associate with the term. "Policy" in this view refers to how order is maintained through

politics, understood as the heterogeneous strategic relations that shape lives and worlds.

An important part of this "order maintaining" activity involves categorization: of "objects" (e.g., "traffic", "addiction", "literacy"); of "subjects" (e.g., "citizens", "low SES", "asylum seekers"); and "places" (e.g., "the state", "Europe"). Looking specifically at "subjects", Shore and Wright (2003: 4) make the important point that "from the cradle to the grave, people are classified, shaped and ordered according to policies". Thinking about such categories as the effects of policies rather than as necessary and natural ways of grouping people creates an opening to consider how they are produced and how they translate into diverse lived realities. Annemarie Mol (1999) introduces the concept of ontological politics to emphasize that such lived realities are created by, rather than reflected in, social practices, including policy and research practices.

With this broader canvas, policy workers are encouraged to reflect on the role they play in governing practices. How do the specific tasks they undertake contribute to shaping social order? What assumptions about people and the world underpin their activities and the policies to which they contribute? What sorts of effects follow from governing in a particular way, effects that are typically ignored in a focus on "measurable outcomes"?

These are some of the questions pursued in the book. To assist in this project we introduce a simple tool called "What's the Problem Represented to be?" or the WPR approach to policy analysis. As is outlined in Chapter 2, this "how to" guide or "analytic strategy" brings together a sequence of questions that allows an opening up of policies to the kind of interrogation signaled above. An explicit challenge to the conventional view that policies *address* problems, it approaches policies as problematizations that *produce* "problems" as particular types of problems. By asking how "problems" are represented or constituted in policies, it becomes possible to probe underlying assumptions that render these representations intelligible and the implications that follow for how lives are imagined and lived.

Earlier we claimed that poststructuralism has occupied a less well-articulated and more contested position in the field of policy analysis than in some other areas of social research and practice. But there *are* well-developed pockets of policy research in the social sciences that have been shaped by, and have shaped, poststructural thinking. In the past 40 years, subfields or subdisciplines have emerged out of engagements with poststructuralism: "policy anthropology" is one, "policy sociology"

another, as well as the field of "governmentality studies" that traverses many of the social and political sciences (including policy anthropology and policy sociology). These contributions and insights have shaped our own thinking about policy and policy analysis and have, in some cases, quite clearly contributed to the thinking of policy analysts who have deployed the analytic strategy which is the focus of this book: the "What's the Problem Represented to be?" (WPR) approach.

Anthropologists influenced by Foucault, for example, have opened up new perspectives on the study of policy through a focus on policy as a cultural phenomenon. By seeing policy as cultural, it is possible to reflect on the way policy has become an increasingly central concept and instrument in the organization of contemporary societies. Similar to the concepts "family", "society", or "nation", "policy" is a key way of conceptualizing and symbolizing social relations. As Shore and Wright (2011: 2) argue: "There are few, if any, populations today that are not in some way or another touched by the classificatory logics and regulatory powers of policy". Shore (2012: 90; emphasis in original) distinguishes the anthropological approach from conventional policy analysis in this way:

> Whereas most scholars tend to treat policy as a given, seldom questioning its meaning or ontological status as a category, an anthropology *of* policy 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.

In making this distinction, Shore invokes the kind of skepticism introduced above: policies are contingent historical creations, human constructions, that produce effects.

The usual approach within policy scholarship, however, is to treat policy as axiomatic or self-evident: society must be ordered, and policy is a practical, natural, or sensible way of doing so. This positivist tendency to treat policies as objective entities—the results of decisions made by rational authorities, ostensibly to address known problems to produce desired outcomes—is one of the reasons policy anthropologists contend that "policy analysis needs to be rescued from policy analysts" (Shore 2012: 92). For example, Shore and Wright (2011: 8) suggest that given the capacity of trained anthropologists "to understand the meanings and subjective understandings of policy makers and, at the same time, to challenge received wisdom and think outside of the conventional policy

box", they have an "analytic edge" over policy analysts who have difficulty stepping outside the conceptual schema of "policy science". Yet poststructuralism challenges the privileging of all forms of expertise and knowledge and, as such, the implication that policy analysts are mere technicians who are produced by and who produce policy. In poststructuralism, both theorists and practitioners are treated as "subjects" in process, and as immersed in taken-for-granted knowledges that require critical scrutiny. Chapter 2 elaborates how the questions in a WPR analytic strategy facilitate this practice of self-problematization.

Poststructural ideas have also influenced sociologists to reflect on taken-for-granted notions of policy in particular social fields, particularly education policy, health policy, and social policy. Stephen Ball (1990; 1993; 2015), a proponent of policy sociology, draws on Foucault's theory of discourse to describe policy as discourse. Describing policy *as* discourse directs attention to "the way in which policy ensembles, or collections of related policies, exercise power through a *production* of 'truth' and 'knowledge'" (Ball 1993: 14; emphasis in original). Following Foucault, Ball's characterization of policy as discourse emphasizes the constitutive, or productive, nature of policies. In this approach, rather than focusing on how people make policy, attention turns to the way policy makes people. At the same time, Ball attends to the "creative social activity" (1993: 12) and "agency" (2015: 307) of those (such as teachers) who, in his terms, *enact* policy, challenging the commonly assumed separation between policy generation and policy implementation.

Sociologists (Coffee 2004; Lall 2012) have been increasingly drawn into the research task of identifying "dominant discourses" in educational, health, and social policy, and there has been a great deal of attention given to the operation of the contemporary "discourses" of neoliberalism and management theory in these areas. When these "discourses" are conceptualized as monolithic and determining, there is a tendency to envisage policy work as necessarily implicated in the rolling out of neoliberalism and/or managerialism. To protect against this tendency, Ball (1997: 261) highlights the existence of "pockets of resilience and counter-discursive activity". The applications of WPR in this book illustrate precisely this form of activity.

Governmentality scholars working with Foucault have provided the most visible questioning of "policy", and their arguments are looked at more closely in Chapter 3 and elsewhere in the book. Put briefly, governmentality refers to the way of thinking—or mentality—that allows the

exercise of power by social authorities to manage populations in modern polities (Miller and Rose 1990: 2). Governmentality scholars are interested in what makes modern government possible, including how the governmental schemes and programs put in place make sense to those who govern, as well as to those who are governed. They have focused attention on (at least) three key themes that make up this "will to govern": political rationalities (ways of thinking about what governing entails); the technologies or techniques involved in governing; and the "subjects" of government, or the diverse forms of persons that are presupposed and also delivered by governmental activity.

The focus in governmentality literature on the "programmatic character of government", described as an "eternal optimism" about developing programs to administer society better (Miller and Rose 1990: 4), is often accompanied by references to policy makers and policy workers as "programmers" and administrators (Miller and Rose 1990: 4, 27–28; Rose et al. 2006: 86, 99). However, as O'Malley et al. (1997: 513) note, there is space within a governmentality perspective to recognize a "constitutive role for contestation (among rulers, and between and among those who are ruled)". In line with this perspective, we wish to avoid "fixing" the role, identity, or work of the policy analyst as a technician or a programmer, to see, instead, the policy worker *cum* analyst as engaged in the practices of interrogating, criticizing, and evaluating policies, and through these practices, unmaking and re-making policy. Indeed, we see it as our task to provide a tool to facilitate exactly this form of critique. To this end, in Chapter 2, we offer the WPR approach as an analytic strategy to facilitate these practices, and hence to promote a poststructural sensibility. Such an approach, we suggest, enables policy workers to reflect critically on governing practices, to theorize their location within those practices, and to resist practices deemed to have deleterious consequences for specific people and groups.

This characterization of policy work and policy workers, we acknowledge, does not fit with the modernist conception of the policy worker deploying scientific methods in the service of solving social problems, gathering "evidence", creating social order, or contributing to societal "progress". But our project is to disrupt these certainties. From a Foucault-influenced poststructural perspective, policy work, like all knowledge work, is political work; policy research, like all research, is understood as a form of ontological politics (Mol 1999) that makes worlds.

Remaking policy analysis as political work is especially timely given the reaffirmation of rationalist approaches in contemporary policy worlds. In