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Policy Archaeology: A Qualitative Approach to Policy Analysis

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Introduction

Since my time as an MSW student, the conventional models of policy analysis have troubled me because of their reductionistic qualities and assumed linearity of both the policy process and the analysis of it. Imbedded in my dissatisfaction is the realization that politics and political power and inclinations have as much to do with policy development and implementation as rational decision making does. I also recognized early that quantitative policy research made both policy and its context appear too simple.

In my search for alternatives I have discovered a variety of non rational models of analysis principally developed by constructivists (see for example Kingdon, 1984; Stone, 1997) and principally guided by qualitative methods. Though these approaches capture important aspects of political reasoning by using a more circular as opposed to linear logic, these models also seem to overlook important aspects of policy analysis. What I observed was much discussion about policies and their consequences with many strategies to discover policy intent and implications, but I found little questioning of the frameworks or models that guided these analyses.

This presentation has as its goal expanding the framework of policy studies while making policy analysis a real and useful skill. I believe that the alternative approach that I offer places policy analysis in the context of economic and social justice within a global perspective. It serves to radicalize policy analysis when considering social needs and global solutions. The approach that I will introduce is drawn from the work of Michele Foucault (1972) and developed by James J. Scheurich (1994) for policy studies in

education. I believe this approach extends qualitative policy analysis in such a way as to have great potential regardless of the cultural context of the policy under investigation.

Conventional Policy Analysis Assumptions

The current landscape of policy analysis or policy studies is filled with a variety of conventional models. All seem to have the same or similar assumptions based on a positivistic paradigmatic perspective.   The modern positivist and post-positivist perspective is characterized by a concern for providing explanations of the status quo, social order, consensus, social integration, solidarity, need satisfaction, and actuality. It tends to be realist, positivist, determinist, and nomothetic. In its overall approach it seeks to provide essentially rational explanations of social affairs. It is pragmatic, problem-oriented, seeking to apply the models and methods of the natural sciences to the study of human affairs. It tends to assume that the social world is composed of relatively concrete empirical artifacts and relationships which can be identified, studied and measured through approaches derived from the natural sciences (Rodwell, 1988). A rational, more linear reasoning is appropriate in analyzing policy, given these assumptions.

Conventional policy analysis is rational, based on the assumption of a single truth. Because "Truth" can be achieved, decisions can be made through a series of well-defined steps that follow a fixed sequence, usually linear. Policy decisions are assumed to be based on market analysis that renders the most benefit for the least cost, based on objectivity and determinant rules. Predictions about consequences or results are based on clearly stated objectives, consideration of alternatives and the consequences of each. Decisions come from a selection of alternatives duly considered with the goal of

minimizing objections. Basically, reason is the building block for an expert dominated field of policy makers and analysts.

Following the assumptions of linearity and rationality in this conventional framework, a social problem is like a disease. Conditions cause the problem. Needs can be identified and they are either real or symbolic. Treatment is required. In this framework problem emergence is a real event. Therefore to make policy it is necessary to develop a description of the problem and its cause. There should be a discussion of competing solutions. When a solution is selected implementation of a response should occur to eliminate or ameliorate the problem. Once implementation is complete, evaluation (mostly quantitative with an attention to outcome measures) of policy implementation is possible with the goal of program or policy improvement. The process and the analysis is undertaken with a focus on the democratic ideal of improving the social order. Examples of these policy analysis types are: rational, chaotic, garbage can, and historic (Fauri, Netting, & O'Connor, 2005).

Interpretivist Analysis Assumptions

More recently, alternative paradigm policy analysts (See Guba, 1985; Kingdon, 1984, Stone, 1997) have developed frameworks lodged in a more interpretive paradigm. The interpretive perspective is informed by a concern to understand the world as it is, to understand the fundamental nature of the social world at the level of subjective experience. It seeks explanation within the realm of individual consciousness and subjectivity, within the frame of reference of the participants as opposed to the observer of action. The approach tends to be nominalist, antipositivist, voluntarist, and ideographic. It sees the social world as an emergent social process which is created by

the individuals concerned. Social reality is little more than a network of assumptions and intersubjectively shared meanings. There is an orientation towards obtaining an understanding of the subjectively created social world as it is in terms of an ongoing process. From a very different standpoint than the positivist perspective, interpretivism is also involved with issues relating to the nature of the status quo, social order, consensus, social integration and cohesion, solidarity, and actuality. From this different standpoint, a more circular, qualitative approach to policy analysis is appropriate and useful (Rodwell, 1988).

This interpretive approach is non rational based on the belief that there are multiple, competing truths and any policy decisions must include multiple understandings. Because of this complexity there is no fixed sequence of analytic steps. Instead analysis occurs in a non linear way based on an understanding of power and politics. For this approach the context of the policy is essential to understanding the choices which are assumed to be based on influence. But that influence is geared to getting what is perceived to be "good" while avoiding what is "bad." The process of analysis is a matter of making sense of paradox and politics through reasoning by metaphor and analogy. The assumption is that policy decisions are made with clarity and reason, but that reason is more fluid and circular because of the complexity of the process and the participation of so many stakeholders.

This perspective considers policies to be symbolic and interpretive solutions to social ills. Here, the policy process is a struggle over symbols related to public concerns. Because of this, the solutions are also symbolic, not real, and only related to latent public concerns. This is because the polity and the attendant politics are central to the process.

Here the framework is one where the range of problem definitions is sought along with the range of goals and acceptable solutions. Within what is seen as acceptable are those that move towards consciousness raising and education. As with the conventional approaches, the focus is also on the democratic ideal of improving the social order. Examples of policy analysis types include: political, contextual, collaborative, and hermeneutic (Fauri, Netting, & O'Connor, 2005).

Please note there is at least one way in which both approaches are similar. Neither approach questions the basic social order. We must mention that others are engaged in more critical policy work such as what is discussed here. Of special note are Mitchell's (1986) and Codd's (1988) deconstruction approaches. However, what we will be discussing today is a different, more critical approach to policy studies itself that has opened new territories for analysis and may offer alternative and expanded methods for policy studies is a more global arena.

Policy Archaeology

Policy archaeology reconceptualizes policy studies. For Foucault and Scheurich policy archaeology allows a response to the lack of questioning the status quo. Rather than beginning after a problem has been set or come to social visibility, it allows a study of the social construction of the social problem because the archaeological approach requires an understanding of how problems become socially visible. It interrogates the social construction of the range of acceptable and unacceptable policy solutions by understanding how the range of solutions is established. Rather than simply describing the policy solutions debated by advocates, policy makers, and policy analysts it investigates the construction of that range. Finally, in rejecting policy analysis as a

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neutral activity, it questions the broader social functions of policy studies with a goal of understanding these social functions.

Policy Archaeology Assumptions

Basic to the assumptions of policy archaelogy are the post-structuralist assumptions of the more critical paradigm philosophers and researchers (see for example, Burrell & Morgan, 1994; Guba, 1990). Most post-structuralists hold a commitment to radical change, emancipation, and potentiality, in an analysis which emphasizes structural conflict, modes of domination, contradiction, and deprivation. Common to those with this perspective is that contemporary society is characterized by fundamental conflicts which can generate radical change through political and economic crises (Rodwell, 1988). In some cases, post-structualist thought focuses on human consciousness, believing that consciousness is dominated by the ideological superstructures within which humans interact. These superstructures drive a cognitive wedge between humans and true consciousness, thus inhibiting or preventing true fulfillment. For those with this critical perspective, the major concern is the release from the constraints which the status quo places upon human development. Society is anti-human, therefore human beings must develop ways to transcend the spiritual bonds and fetters which tie them into existing social patterns in order to be able to realize full potential (Rodwell, 1988).

Based on these assumptions, rather than assuming that policies are constructed through a rational interplay between problems, solutions, and studies regarding both, policy archaeology asserts that the socio-historical context informs what is seen as a problem, what is socially legitimized as a policy solution, and what is acceptable policy analysis. Therefore, policy archaeology represents a different approach to understanding

how problems and problem groups are defined. From this there is a different approach to discussions of policies and policy alternatives. Further, there are different presumptions about the function of policy studies within the larger social order. Basically, policy archaeology questions whether substantial social problems are an indication that the liberal social order itself should be interrogated. This interrogation, for the most part, is best undertaken qualitatively.

Policy Archaeology Framework or Arenas

There are four dimensions of a policy analysis following an archaeological approach (Scheurich, 1994). Arena I is the social problem arena that includes the study of the social construction of the specific social problem. Arena II, the social regularities area, identifies the network of social regularities across social problems. Arena III, the policy solution arena studies the social construction of the range of acceptable policy solutions. Finally, Arena IV, the policy studies arena, requires the study of the social functions of policy studies itself.

This type of analysis, by its nature is complex and sometimes ambiguous. It is iterative and recursive. Work on one area passes through all four arenas, reframing and altering information and interpretations. It requires complex critical thought, not reductionistic approaches and therefore, may be confusing, contradictory or even paradoxical. Because of the nature of the framework, the concepts contained within remain difficult, complex, and not well developed. Not surprisingly, this is not a tidy, logical approach. The order of the analysis of arenas is not necessarily the order of their occurrence. One starts where it makes sense or where one has information. The end

point is achieved when the effort no longer is producing material that significantly refashions or alters any of the four arenas.

Arena I Assumptions and Processes. In this arena, social problems are understood to be social constructions, not necessarily an empirical "given." Nor is the social problem necessarily a natural occurrence. How the social problem is named, defined and discussed as a social problem, the social visibility of some problems as social problems, and the invisibility of other problems as social problems are part of this process of social construction. It is assumed that the social problem has a construction process that can be identified. It is assumed that the problem is real, not that it does or does not exist only in the perceptions of humans. Understanding of the construction process is essential in problem understanding. This effort is different that the traditional process of agenda setting analysis in that the focus of attention is on the politics and process of the emergence of the recognition of the social phenomena first before attention is given to the influences that come to bare on the decisions about what to do about it.

An historical lens is necessary to critically examine the construction process. A hermeneutic method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Rodwell, 1998) is useful here. The examination begins prior to the emergence of the problem as a problem, but this is not just historical recounting of events. Historical artifacts and events including previously ignored but provocative documents are used to investigate the grid of conditions, assumptions, forces that allowed the problem to be made manifest and describable. The idea is to understand the positive conditions of a complex group of relations that allowed the problem's existence. Foucault (1972) calls this "investigation of historical conditions

required to say anything about it [the problem], conditions necessary for it to exist in relation to other objects" (p. 44).

The process in Arena I, then, is the study of numerous, complex strains of information and influence, tracing the problem prior to the naming. This arena examines the problem naming process and investigates the grid of conditions, assumptions, and forces for its appearance. The interest is to discover the set of regularities, the history, allowing the problem's existence. This analysis differs from traditional problem analysis that looks at history to understand why the problem is recognized now and not then, in that the goal is to understand the historical line leading to the current naming. This analysis is on more than one level in an attempt to establish rules of formation of the social problem and the policy choices. The idea is to define the conditions of their realization.

Arena II Assumptions and Processes. In Arena II, the assumption is that social problems do not achieve status in an idiosyncratic, random or natural fashion. This assumption is contrary to most of the other policy frameworks. From this perspective, social regularities are generative. They have a "positive" or constitutive or productive/reproductive nature with a certain generative power by way of producing categories of thought and ways of thinking, even though they may be under the control of an individual or group. A perspective or lens preordains what will be seen. The idea is that you can never really escape the regime of "truth" that is created by the social regularities within a society. Foucault says "we cannot abandon [the order within which we live], even where we would attach it (as cited in Margolis, 1993, p. 58).

Social regularities constitute what is socially visible or credible. These regularities do not literally create material reality. Instead they constitute what is socially selected and verified as real. Visibility of the problem, then, is not primarily a function of interactive intentions and actions of consciously involved social agents or groups. What gets to a policy agenda is only what is generatively possible within a society. Students of Foucault will recognize that the grid of social regularities constitutes policy archaeology as a policy studies methodology just as the grid constitutes social problems, policy solutions, and conventional and interpretive policy studies orientations.

The policy response results from the grid of social regularities that constitutes what becomes visible as a social problems and what is seen as the range of credible policy solutions. Social regularities are not intentional. They are the force of a set of conditions in accordance with which a practice is exercised. They are historical and within the context of human activity. But they are not necessarily within the awareness of the social agents. They are life forms and practices within a social order. Also note, social order should be taken to mean the grid of social regularities taken as a whole. These social orders are historically shifting, complex, dispersed systems with much influence at the margins that create unities and differences, continuities and discontinuities, while still producing and reproducing the dominant order.

The idea of the process in Arena II is to identify the regularities and delineate the shifts in regularities that shape the emergence of the problem. Here, again, a hermeneutic, sometimes dialectic process is useful. By identifying the grid or network of regularities one can determine the basis common to the series of representations of the problem dispersed throughout history, including economics, and philosophy. This

archaeology actually uncovers culture. This uncovered culture could be radically different assumptions, rules, names, and meanings with radically different ways of life. Each culture, like each grid, teaches its members the nature of self and the correct way to have a self. Embedded in this analysis is an assumption of interdependence, not individuality.

The process produces an unpacking of what is socially legitimized as a social problem and reveals a proper range of solutions in order to identify the rules of formation. This unpacking is actually geared to the creating of archaeological thinking which is very similar to constructivist thinking (see Rodwell, 1998). It is attempting to discover not the results of individuals acting or interacting, but the array of multiple formations being in play that constitute everything within that array.

Arena III Assumptions and Processes. The assumptions of Arena III are inextricably linked to the assumptions of the two prior arenas. Here there is an assumption that there exists a range of possible policy choices shaped by the grid of social regularities. It assumes that the shaping of the choices is not intentional or conscious. It also assumes that within the range, some choices are seen as relevant and others are invisible. Some choices have privilege over others. This is because social regularities do not identify objects. They constitute them and in the practice of doing so, conceal their own invention.

The process in this arena is to study how the grid of social regularities generates a range of possible and impossible solutions. The idea of the process is to uncover the foundational (less changing) categories with the formational (more circumstansical) categories to create a multi-formational archaeology that allows the understanding of a

given particular situation being constituted by one formation (for example, gender or race) rather than another. The grid might contain gender, race, family values, class, morality, sexuality, governmentality, professionalization, among others. The idea is to identify and understand the enactment of the interacting intersection of multiple formations. Interrogation of both texts and stakeholders would be of use when enacting this arena. Here one does not just look at laws, but how current definitions of categories exist.

  Arena IV Assumptions and Processes. Two major assumptions underpin Arena IV. First, policy studies, like social problems and policy solutions, are constituted by social regularities. In addition, conventional and interpretive policy studies frameworks serve a social order function. In this arena, there is an assumption of a social function of policy studies. Policy studies legitimize constructions; constrain the range of choices and refrain from questioning the social order.

  Based on these assumptions, the processes in Arena IV involve questioning the function of a policy analysis process in order to determine how it occurs. Rather than data collection, the arena calls for analysis. An effort is made to determine the effects of the policy analysis process by answering the question, where does analysis of this social problem and policy response fit within the social order? Further, it is important to discover how the process has been constituted by social regularities.

Application of the Framework: Megan's Law

  In order to get a quick understanding of how Policy Archaeology showcases politics, policy and social change, let us apply the framework to a Virginia Law. Let us look at Megan's Law. In summary the law states that those found guilty of serious,

violent sexual offenses (both adults and juveniles) are required to register with the police in their locality every ninety days for ten years. Further, law enforcement is required to provide community notification of the presence of a sexual offender in the neighborhood or community. The law creates an internet accessible site for public access to the registry of violent sexual offenders where detailed information is contained on each offender. It also creates an electronic system to notify entities providing care services to children when an offender lives in the same or a contiguous zip code.

To engage in policy archaeology of this law let us apply the framework. In Arena I the following are some of the questions that should be considered. What is the problem? How did it come to be seen as the problem? Why is sexual abuse privileged over physical abuse? What made emergence of this problem possible? Why this problem and not others? How did it become noticed? How was it moved from invisibility to visibility? What was happening prior to the emergence of the problem as the problem? What was the naming process? What were the existing conditions? What were the assumptions? What were the forces involved? Is the social problem sexual predators in Virginia with the potential to hurt our children because we are not able to protect the children from the predators? Or is it something else? In answering these questions it is important to come to an understanding how previously ignored aspects of child abuse, domestic violence, and community safety impacted the conditions, assumptions and forces that allowed sexual predator behavior to be made manifest and describable as a problem. Attention must be maintained to the continual nature of the reframing that occurred prior to this problem being declared.

In Arena II, the following are important questions. What are the objects, concepts, etc. that built the theory of Megan's law? What were the categories of thought and ways of thinking? What were dominant and subordinate values? What was shifting to shape the emergence of this social problem and policy solution? What are the other social regularities that are not seen in the solution? Where is male dominance, family values, societal and family violence? How do answers here help to create a deeper understanding of what exactly the problem is?

Arena III suggests: what was the range of possible and impossible solutions? What was the grid of social regularities that allowed the elements of this particular response? What possible consequences were acceptable and unacceptable? Why weren't the victims of the predators considered? Why weren't other ways of tracking considered? Understanding here attends to the language used to establish what constitutes the problem with the help of the clarity gained from understanding what was socially selected and verified as the real problem. This provides material for understanding what is possible or impossible by way of solutions due to the extant social regularities regarding sexual, familial and community roles, etc. This approach allows a continual reframing of any arena, given what emerges in the analysis. The back and forth of this analysis would need to continue until no new material is produced about the state of the sexual predator problem and the Megan's law response. Only then would one move to Arena IV

Arena IV looks at what was the function of conventional and interpretive policy studies related to sexual predators and the Megan's law policy solution? What is the preferred social order regarding protecting children and how does policy archaeology, the

analysis framework relate to that? What, if anything different in understanding of policy intent, implementation, or experience is provided by policy archaeology?

From this quick application can we together engage in a critical evaluation of this frame for policy analysis? What do we gain and what might we lose from the perspective of social development in the context of globalization and in a time of global uncertainty? What are the costs and benefits of a different approach to thinking about ourselves within a global economy, our social problems and our efforts to solve those problems? Does qualitative inquiry used in this way enhance good science and good scholarship? What do the alternatives have to offer that this approach does not? Finally, is policy archaeology "teachable" to government officials, politicians, academic colleagues and students?

Final Thoughts

As we leave you to pursue on your own the possibilities and losses associated with this different way of thinking about policy studies requiring a global connection we would like to provide some final questions and thoughts that might well be best answered through qualitative means.

- Why are the most vulnerable seen as a social problem and the most powerful not? Is it important and possible to use the continuous, iterative nature of policy archaeology to assure that the concerns and values that maintain certain focus become transparent?

- If free will and moral agency function in a liberal social order, does the cultural context of policies selected to assure that social order systematically produce real or symbolic injustices? Do policy studies, generally and policy archaeology specifically enhance or impede those injustices?

Finally, policy archaeology is complex, ambiguous, with loose ends and confusing contradictions, but policy archaeology allows a different way of thinking about ourselves, our social problems, and our efforts to solve them. It may well be a useful way to engage in qualitative inquiry in a time of global uncertainty. It overcomes methodological fundamentalism (Lincoln & Cannella, 2004) by offering historical and present-day transparency to the necessarily complex understanding of policy intent, implementation and experience.

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