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The sociology of policy-making in the modern state

Intent and human action

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Abstract

The article asks how we can best understand policy-making processes, and how a sociology of policy-making might proceed. Specific consideration is given to policy intent and how that can be known given the collective nature of policy-making and the assumption that intent is what individuals rather than groups possess. I inquire into various sociologies of social systems and social action as well as liberal humanist ideas about the individual and rational action, asking what they offer for understanding policy intent. The contributions of the post-foundationalists and network theories are also examined in this light. Attention is given to the work of Norbert Elias, and it is argued that his 'personal pronouns as figurational model' in conjunction with discourse analysis provides a basis for developing a sociology of policy-making that acknowledges human agency and the collective and social nature of policy-making.

Keywords: government, human action, policy, political theory, sociology

How should we understand policy-making processes, and how might a sociology of policy-making proceed? More specifically, how can we understand policy intent given the collective nature of policy-making, and the assumption that intent is what an individual rather than groups can possess? I begin answering these questions by considering what a sociology of social systems and a sociology of social action might offer. I argue that the idea in *social systems*, which assumes that human action is determined, is limited in being able to provide a sociology of policy-making. However, a second model, a sociology of *social action*, which assumes the individual to be an active rational agent, may offer more.

Attention is given to the liberal or classic sociological traditions that represent the individual as an asocial, rational and discrete entity, and the argument is made that they also are limited in being able to offer a credible sociology of policy-making (Durkheim, 1964; Parsons, 1954). Problems with the liberal idea of the individual as it relates to policy intent are also considered. It is argued that the liberal idea of the individual as an independent and static agent owes much to conceptual distinctions drawn between actors and their activities, a separation that encourages us to overlook the constantly moving, highly interdependent, interacting and changing nature of social relationships. Moreover, liberalism neglects to consider how emotions influence social action. Similarly there is no account for the bearing that ignorance, being misguided, illogical thinking and perverse ideas have on social action, or in this case, policy. It is argued that given that policy-making processes are always collective and involve the objectives of many players, including government ministers, lobbyists and the media, we cannot sensibly talk of policy intent as something that belongs to the individual. This also means we cannot start from a policy and track it back through 'causal connections' to a single player's ego and discover policy intent.

Contributions from post-foundationalist sociologists and more specifically identity theorists are also considered. It is argued that discourse analysis and its capacity to reveal how narratives inform argument, set policy agendas and shape action makes a critical contribution to policy studies. Moreover, discourse analysis shows how inherited structures of speech and thought inform relationships in policy contexts. Yet, while these contributions are invaluable they only provide a partial explanation of policy-making processes. They do not inquire into questions of human agency, the dynamics of relationships and the role of intent in policy-making processes. Given this, I turn to the work of Norbert Elias.

A basis for a sociology of policy-making lies in the work of Elias, and particularly in his 'personal pronouns as figurational model' (1978). As a forerunner to network theory, Elias recognizes the active involvement of people expressing human characteristics like emotions, desires and determination in their relationships with others. And while recent approaches to network theories make value contributions to policy analysis, they are limited in three key ways: first, they cannot explain how specific interactions change policy; second, they cannot tell us how networks enable or hinder interaction; and, third, they tell us little about policy intent.

Elias's discussion on the 'perspectival character' of human relations and his 'personal pronoun model' can contribute to a sociology of policy. Elias's work, in conjunction with discourse analysis, provides a basis for developing a sociology of policy-making that acknowledges human agency and the collective and highly social nature of policy-making.

The sociological task here is to make policy-making, and particularly the concept of policy intent, more understandable and thereby enable policy

analysts and policy-makers alike to better orient themselves in those social processes, which, although created through their own actions, still remain largely obscure. In doing this they will be in a better position to manage and understand policy-making.

Sociology and social systems

One way to begin investigating the potential of sociology for understanding policy-making is to consider the question from the perspective of two key traditions which demarcate the structure–agency debate: a 'sociology of social systems' and a 'sociology of action' (Dawe, 1970).

The 'sociology of social systems' is best represented by Parsons and Shils (1951) and assumes that factors external to the social actors *determine* their actions. The sociology of social systems proceeds either by establishing a limited range of possibilities for action, or by imbuing actors with particular and objective interests constrained by various 'structural' factors to act in a particular way. Either way, social actors are determined by a limited range of structural and objective forces or interests. From such a sociological perspective action is equivalent to the goal-oriented behaviours which Parsons and Shils (1951: 80) saw as constituting action within a social system. It also needs to be said, given Parsons' emphasis on social order, that 'social action', unless it is anomic or anti-social action, exists to maintain social equilibrium.

One example of this kind of sociology is evident in Michael Pusey's now renowned book on Australian public policy (1991). According to Pusey the policy direction of the nation was determined by a macro-system – 'economic rationalism' – which, he argued, explained what happened after 1983 in respect to Australia's policy commitment market-oriented reform and economic liberalism more broadly. As Watts observed: 'Grounded in some characteristic modes of "doing sociology"', Pusey seemed to explain why and how it was that a 'nation-building state had changed its mind' (2001: 1).

Fenna (1998: 86) offers a similar illustration of how macro-sociological systems accounts of policy-making are said to work by discerning the causal factors operating:

> … causality is about a hypothesized relationship between determinants (sometimes called independent variables) and outcomes (sometimes called dependent variables). Theories of the state build on such an hypothesis about causality to suggest ways of understanding the forces that drive policy.

In Fenna's case, the problematic implications of a sociology of systems is evident in its reliance on metaphors borrowed from physics – like 'causality', 'forces' and 'independent' and 'dependent variables'. They are metaphors that sit uncomfortably with observations that policy-making is

an activity involving innovation and change, activities created by actors who exercise human agency and choice.

Sociology of social action

The second type of sociology is a 'sociology of social action', which sees the individual as active rather than passive. This is represented by Weber (1978) who created a typology of actions that included rational, instrumental, affectional (emotional) and traditional action as part of his public administration theory. His work may, at least on the face of it, better characterize policy-making. Weber's sociology of action assumes that actors are self-conscious or reflective decision-makers and that sociology is a science which attempts to gain an interpretative understanding of social action in order to arrive at a causal explanation of its course and effects (1978).

Sociologists using this approach assume that social *actors know the relevant facts*, are aware of their preferences and know the best ways of matching opportunities with their preferences. Such an approach privileges cognitive and rational motives by emphasizing how intentions, beliefs, values and rules of interpretation shape social interaction.

Conventionally, the idea of policy intent has been a significant element in policy studies literature (Bessant et al., 2006; Colebatch, 1998; Fenna, 1998). Indeed policy-makers' intentions are often taken as so central and obvious that they are already known and hence no further analysis is required. As Colebatch observes:

> The assumption that policy is concerned with the definition and accomplishment of purposes is so grounded in the dominant paradigm of human action as instrument of rationality that it is not subject to the examination which it merits. It is taken for granted that action is directed towards goals, that policy is the pursuit of collective goals, and that policy statements indicate what these goals are. (1998: 52)

Policy analysts typically begin an inquiry by naming the discovery or constitution of the problems the policies are directed towards addressing (Bacchi, 1999; Bessant et al., 2006; Fenna, 1998). Some go on to ask whether policy-makers accurately identified the underlying sources of the problem that policies were said to target, and whether the policy solutions effectively addressed the issues said to have made the problems happen (Dunn, 2004). Indeed, any critical discussion about contradictions or discrepancies between intent and policy outcomes assumes a capacity to accurately identify and trace policy intent (Colebatch, 1998; Edwards et al., 2001).

Political or religious beliefs, ideas and values are offered as explanations of policy activity. Such approaches assume intent is, or can be made observable by interpretative techniques that expose the causal flow of rules, meanings and norms that shape action emanating from intent. In other words, once intent is identified, analysis involves tracing the funnel of causality to the outcome.

Finally establishing policy intent is central to any policy evaluation process (Dunn, 2004). In the prescriptive literature on policy evaluation, the effectiveness of policy is determined by establishing the degree to which policy intent matches outcomes. While talking about the importance of identifying policy objectives in assessing the worth of a policy, Edwards et al. suggest that:

> … good policy is that which achieves its objectives as set by the decision-makers. This could be a single minister or a group of ministers, such as Cabinet. If the objectives are not clear, obviously it is hard to judge the achievements of a policy. (2001: 2)

But how, given Edwards' reference to the objectives of a group of government ministers such as Cabinet, can we understand intent if it is assumed that intent is something an individual, rather than a group has?

Does this mean can we speak of policy intent in equivocal ways? Does the concept of intention present a ubiquitous element that helps us understand policy-makers' actions? What is the character of the things that policy intent is said to refer to? These questions about intention and human action have intrigued social theorists since the time of Socrates, Aristotle and Plato.

Rational action

Closer to our own time, this long-standing interest in intent and human action is evident in the liberal humanist tradition that goes from Hume's writings on causality, to Husserl, who broke from positivism in preference for inquiries into the subjective experience, to Chisholm's (1971) focus on perception and Van Quine's analysis of linguistics. While these writers offer different insights, they all share one assumption: that human action is rational action.

Moreover, while these treatments provide valuable insights into human action, there are features of policy-making that make their use problematic. For example, the idea of policy as rational action driven by an identifiable intent ignores the creative or constitutive role of experts in discovering problems while overlooking the contingency of policy-making which reveals its disorderly, variable and unexpected qualities.

And focusing on intent as rational human action neglects the complexity and fragmentary nature of policy communities, and how they develop connections and shape formative ideas and political agendas. It also ignores the value of phenomenological inquiry, which can produce insights into the role of confusion, misguided conduct, accidents, deliberate deception, ignorance and malevolence in policy-making.

Intention and theories of mind-action

The concept of 'intentionality' has been positioned within a theory of mind/action which owes much to liberal theory. This involved theorists of

human action from Hume (1975) to Bronaugh and Marras (1971) and Davidson (1971), who offer accounts of the intent–action nexus.

For Wilson (1989: 51), intention is produced by an inner volition, by a will that connects to particular action or sequence of actions. Similarly, for Chisholm understanding action and intention involved explicating the concept of causation – described as one state of affairs contributing causally to another state of affairs, and it is the individual who contributes to such actions (1971: 39–80). Anscombe (1963) similarly treated intention as a central characteristic of action.

Davidson (1980) also considered how we understand intent as a motive, representing intent as desires, wants or beliefs, and positioning them within a threefold analytic: the action, the relevant beliefs or desires, and an appropriate explanatory relation between those first two factors. That is, we can explain an action in terms of the actor's reasons, identified by reference to beliefs or desires. This is close to Weber's sociology of action.

Central to the notion of intentionality as it developed since the 18th century, is the idea of an individual. These accounts of intentionality and their role in explaining action assumed actors were self-conscious or reflective decision-makers.

While it is difficult to offer a comprehensive summary of such a variable body of literature in this article, some observations can be made. To begin, in the effort to understand human action there has been a reliance on a rational and cognitive bias which has the effect of overlooking the influence of emotions. It is a bias that has partly been addressed by belated attempts to recover a role for emotions in a sociology of action (Barbalet, 1998).

Furthermore, the dominant liberal view of action and intentionality rely on accounts of the individual as a separate, single and coherent agent. Since the 18th century the idea of the individual has permeated the social sciences and humanities and shaped our understandings of human action, at the expense of treating intent and meaning as they relate to collective action.

Liberalism and the individual

According to liberal discourses and classic sociologists like Weber and Parsons, each individual is naturally different and separate from every other individual in terms of their motivations, intentions and intelligence. It is an account that encourages the partitioning off what are interrelated things into variables or factors, without considering how those discrete aspects of social action connect.

The individual self is represented as a stable, single coherent, self-contained and unified subject, when we are actually dependent on each other and highly variable (Elias, 1978: 116). Each individual 'has' an individual self, a mind and an independent set of wants or needs and is regarded

as a static agent with clear boundaries that separate them off from other individuals (MacPherson, 1966). This leads to the belief that the self exists inside us, but is somehow divided off by an invisible barrier separates the inside from the outside. Yet those who represent the self in this way fail to ask which part of the self forms the dividing wall and which part is shut away inside. What is the barrier separating the inner self from the social, from the outside (Elias, 1978: 117)?

The qualities said to comprise the liberal individual – like relatively fixed intent, drives, motives, emotions – are presumed to be tangible and observable. Moreover, the personality tells us who the individual is and what influences their behaviour. In this way, how they act is explained by the kind of person they are (introvert, exhibitionists, etc.). Rarely from this understanding do we consider that the reverse is possible: that actions inform personality or self.

This view can also be aligned with naturalistic or biological arguments. There are long-standing claims that women are biologically and intellectually different from men and lack certain abilities men possess, and that these 'natural' differences explain intellectual or cognitive disparities between women and men. Currently we see a resurgence of interest in genetics and neuroscience which attempts to explain human actions like risk-taking, spatial cognition, emotions, motor and language functions (Giedd et al., 1999: 861–3; Moir and Moir, 1998). Similarly, sex hormones continue to be used to 'explain' why men are 'better at' cognitive and mechanical tasks and more able than women in coping with demanding jobs (Witelson et al., 1999: 2149–53).

A set of parallel reductionist arguments draws on sex role theory, offering essentialist categories. When applied to policy, sex role socialization is used to 'explain' why men are less likely than women to produce 'nurturing and caring policies'. Men 'are assertive', dominating and ambitious which 'explains' the gendered nature of policy engagement and outcomes. In short, particular 'types of personality', socialization and/or biology are said to determine behaviour.

Ontologically 'individuals' are constituted as the individual atomic 'building blocks of society', operating in market-like competitive contexts where they compete to survive (Arblaster, 1984). Moreover, the ideas, intentions, opinions and beliefs on which the individual acts originate in their own minds as a determining element. The individual exercises responsibility for the person they become, and makes choices by taking actions that ensure they secure their own interests and become self-sufficient and independent (Davidson, 1971: 3–37).

Inquiry that is confined to seeing individuals as separate entities provides a skewed understanding of the social, of exercises of power and other sociological questions including meaning and intent. This view is problematic for the following reasons laid out in the next section.

Problems with liberal humanist ideas of 'the individual'

Individual personality explains intent, and interpreting action

The existence of 'an individual personality' can only be inferred by observing and deciphering behaviour. There is no tangible entity that can be referred to to demonstrate the existence of personality, which raises questions about interpretation and what meanings we can rightfully give to behaviour. This observation can cause some disquiet on the part of many sociologists who claim to be social scientists, yet who find themselves in a position where they cannot comply with the declared ideals of empirical social science.

This raises questions about how we interpret behaviour that 'demonstrates' intent or 'individual personality'. Consider for example, how we ought to interpret the now infamous handshake between the Australian Prime Minister John Howard and then Opposition Leader Mark Latham on the eve of the 2004 federal election. What is proper handshake etiquette in that context and how can we read political intent into body language? How can a 'forceful and up-close handshake' be interpreted? How can we read intent into action that transgresses personal space conventions? Was Latham's intention to intimidate? For some commentators, it was aggressive and 'thug-like' behaviour explainable by reference to 'his personality'.

How do such accounts match Latham's own report? According to Latham, rather than intending to intimidate his political opponent, he acted as he did to counter Howard's 'flappy-style arm shake' which Latham says he found unnerving.

> I don't enjoy a handshake that is more an arm shake flapping style. I think it should be a handshake, and with Mr Howard to avoid the flapping you've got to get a bit closer to him and that's what I did.… It was a handshake because I don't like an arm shake and a flapping-style of handshake but that is just a man's point of view. (in *The Age*, 2004)

Rather than intending to intimidate, his purpose was to protect himself from a personal greeting he earlier experienced as unmanly and 'unnerving'.

Whatever the truth, it is clear that the two accounts presented above are plausible. While Latham's report may provide a revised description of what took place in his head at the time, outside observers' interpretations were likely to have been informed by their political perspectives, along with various explanatory discourses which seemed at the time to offer a sensible account. In other words, people say things for a variety of reasons rather than simply recovering and reporting the facts.

What is said and done is part of an interactive engagement where politicians and policy-makers become adept at observing each other and being observed, where they constantly read gestures, performances and facial expressions for signs of intent on the part of political rivals. Locked in what

are often quite unpredictable power plays and bids for favours, politicians and policy-makers more generally, revise, change and manipulate what they say and do according to what happens during and after the event.

The problem with interpretation and how we read actions like a handshake or an utterance indicates why the idea of 'the individual' with a discrete and coherent personality that can be referred to to reveal intent and explain behaviour is limited. And while we may act as if a 'personality' exists to explain conduct, and sometimes seem to get it right, that is different from saying that a particular mental entity exists in the individual that makes them act as they do. Rather than 'individual personality' being the source of action, it is more complex. It may be, for example, that certain socially learned stories or explanatory discourses about being a 'real man' or other 'kinds of persons' influence action and accounts of those actions, whether they be a handshake or policy.

The individual as universal, transnational and transcultural

If we accept the idea of 'the individual' then we should be able to identify specific characteristic that define the individual in all places and times. Yet many observers disagree with what they describe as specifically Western views of the individual and human nature. In social contexts where free enterprise does not feature as highly as it does in 'the West', where communities are not preoccupied with 'markets', 'enterprise' and the valorization of economic liberalism, then we are more likely to see people who are not committed to a liberal worldview, who do not endeavour to rationally calculate the strategic actions that will promote their happiness in competition with other 'individuals'.

In this way, it can be seen that the individual as an enterprising character interested in competition, and with the desire to have more in order to be happy, is a product of a particular set of socio-economic arrangements specific to a historical and cultural context, rather than a figure illustrating the essential features of human nature that explain intention and human action regardless of place or time

The individual as coherent and stable vs inconsistent multi-dimensional identities

The limitations of the traditional conceptions of the individual as autonomous, stable and rational have also been explored by Nietzsche and Freud, and more recently by post-foundationalist theorists like Derrida (1978). While offering different analyses, these writers challenge the liberal humanist view by emphasizing the multiple, even contradictory, forms which identity can take. While those critiques have their own weaknesses, one strength is their attention to identity as multi-dimensional and dynamic. The idea of positionality or subject positions acknowledges how different identities (e.g. masculine or Muslim) provide the content of subjectivity in

ways that go beyond traditional notions of the self or individual as stable and coherent.

Post-foundationalists also point to the ways language is used to construct or 'describe' certain 'types' (shy, aggressive), as if those descriptors refer to actual things inherent in a person and which determine and explain their actions. The value of this insight is evident when we realize that the words used to describe the individual or their personality have no meaning if removed from their social or policy context. I am not suggesting we do not have particular dispositions, but that the idea of the liberal individual as an asocial, independent stable entity, and that actions originate from internal psychological structures, ignores the role of the social and particularly the role of language. Moreover, these notions cannot account for the contradictory and changing nature of the self.

The individual as external to social relationships

The 'communitarian' tradition, which differs from the above-mentioned tradition, also critiques the liberal humanist individual, arguing that it portrays an asocial creature who is outside human interaction. As Sandel (1982: 62) observes, it presents a person who is beyond experience and external to social relationships, their identity pre-formed and invincible to alteration.

This critique introduces basic questions about how attempts to understand policy – and indeed any social action – can proceed. It is evident, for example, that what we mean by 'the social' needs to be better understood than it usually is, either by 'methodological individualists' or by 'social systems determinists'. To achieve this we need sharper vocabularies – including more appropriate metaphors.

A way ahead

Sociologists like Weber who promoted a sociology of action and phenomenologists like Schutz provide a basis for developing a better understanding of policy as social action which is negotiated and mediated through collective symbols (language) and informed by systems of meaning and belief (religious beliefs and ethical aspirations). And while Weber tried to defend the idea of action as rational action, Schutz acknowledged the presence of multiple actors, and in doing so made it obvious why the idea of simple linear causality that Weber relied on in his sociology of action had to be dismissed in preference for more complex accounts of social action as negotiated, contingent and processual (1962: 214–26). While these sociologists provide a beginning for a sociology of policy, it is the work of the later sociologists like Norbert Elias, particularly his writing on 'personal pronouns as a figurational model' and 'process sociology', that holds promise for a credible sociology of policy.

What follows is a case study of the Hawke government's re-introduction of university fees (HECS), which I use to demonstrate how Elias's work, in conjunction with that of network theorists (Dowding, 1995: 136–58; Latour, 1999: 15–25), provides a basis for a sociology of policy-making and the question of policy intent.

The challenge here for sociologists is to find out what the meanings, or the 'intended sense', of social actions and policy objectives are for policy-makers themselves. I argue that policy network theory on its own cannot deliver in this regard. While network theory is helpful in describing and analysing relational 'structures' it cannot explain how specific interactions change policy, or how networks enable or disable interactions. Nor can it tell us much about policy intent in the way Elias's 'personal pronoun figurational model' can.

It is also noted that the task of accessing meaning and intent presents a further problem of establishing how policy-makers themselves experience their own actions and see policy outcomes.

Norbert Elias's 'personal pronouns as a figurational model'

What Elias refers to when he talks of 'figuration' is the dynamic nature of social actors, and the ever changing patterns of social relations created by actors as whole people, not simply by their intellects (rationality). He argued for the need to understand how the dispositions of each side change and are interrelated (Elias, 1978: 130). It is the emotion, irrationality and the physical that Elias also adds to the picture.

More specifically, Elias's 'personal pronouns as a figurational model' comes from his discussion about limitations of language and how that constrains our understanding social relations. To help 'free our minds' from the constraints that sociological concepts like 'individual' and 'society' foster, Elias argues that – rather than using concepts to explain things like social relations that represent people as singular, and offering individual-centric views of interaction – we need language that provides images of a multitude of people, each open to independent processes and different perspectives.

To do justice to the never ending processes by which everyone constantly relates to each other it is necessary to modify how self-experience and relations are spoken about. For Elias one obvious tool is provided in everyday speech and this offers the means to articulate the complexity of social relations. That potential for conceptualizing social relations in the human sciences can be found in personal pronouns. Plotting relations in terms of 'I', 'we' and 'them' can force us to turn those relations into dynamic and interdependent entities. It also provides a means by which the phenomenology of policy-making (the meanings and intent of different players) can be explored.

Use of pronouns like 'I', 'we' and 'them' can be used to plot policy-making communities, to map players' changing orientations within specific contexts and to reveal how speakers relate to and interpret each other. It can also be used to access the perspectives of policy-makers. Given that

pronouns like 'I', 'we' and 'them are inseparable, they are useful for under-standing policy-making communities because they encourage us to see certain actions or utterances in their social context, and appreciate them in relation to all other positions to which other pronouns refer. They serve as an orientation in the group; they are relational and functional through expressing positions relative to others.

In summary, Elias's personal pronoun model can be used to map and analyse social configurations in ways that provide elementary and effective sets of coordinates that can be used to plot policy-making communities and trace policy processes.

Examining the changing figurations by focusing on social meanings and processes, as Elias suggests, also encourages fruitful lines of inquiry into relations between emotions, power, action, knowledge and identity. It invites us to see policy figurations as always fluctuating, with moments of equilibrium, and constantly moving balances of power.

Elias's model encourages inquiry into questions about whether the idea of policy intent is linked too closely to an individualist problematic to be relevant to collective action within policy communities. In short, if talking about individual intent is problematic, can we talk in a sensible way about collective intentionality in policy-making? I argue that we can, by moving away from traditional policy analysis of the kind outlined above, and by appreciating the collective and changing nature of policy objectives or intent in the way Elias's 'personal pronoun as figurational model' facilitates.

Discourse analysts like Yeatman similarly argue that the individual as an autonomous independent unit cannot survive in policy-making communities. For Yeatman, complex alliances in policy-making result from, as they create, a plurality and fragmented voices, all of which seek to be heard (1990: 154). Policy-making in the modern state is an extended version of social action, in which highly complex logics of collective action take place in ever changing, complex webs of intricate relations and contests over meanings. These produce loyalties, deeply divided factions, disputes, staunch alliances and cooperation which are highly political.

The point is simple: there is no conceptual place in a sociology of policy for the idea of independent individuals whose intent is somehow separated out, easily identified and traceable through to a particular policy action.

Central to a sociology of policy is the challenge to establish what an intended sense of policy action might look like, and what meanings are given to policy goals. As mentioned, earlier network theory does not address this problem while discourse analysis focuses on the role of language and overlooks human agency. Sociology has given this problem less consideration than it should have. And, while not talking about policy directly, Elias argues that one reason why sociology has been neglectful in explaining the kind of social relations we see in policy-making is because we do not have concepts that are precise enough to do so.

Elias's 'personal pronoun model' highlights the 'perspectival nature' of policy-making and invites us to see policy-making from the standpoint of 'I', 'we' and 'them'. Its strength is its encouragement of inquiries that offer insider, even ethnographic perspectives, from the 'I' and 'we' viewpoints. It also works to identify who 'Others' are (as 'they') and how they are variously represented. This model promotes a perspectival understanding of human relations, and provides insights into the complex character of interdependences, as well as the role of emotion, irrationality, ignorance and misconceptions in policy-making. It requires analysts to take into account the first and third person perspectives, and in doing so inquire into how meanings, intentions and orientations develop and change as they are realigned according to shifting relations. It reveals how the positions, the determination and desires of policy-makers intermesh and create 'games' which no single player can control. It can help reveal how the moves, plans and perspectives of policy-makers may be shaped by the policy process itself.

A case study: HECS and the Hawke Labor government

What follows is a case study of the introduction of HECS by the Hawke Australian Labor Party (ALP) government policy-making process, which I use to show how Elias's model can contribute towards a sociology of policy-making.

In 1983 the Hawke Labor government came to office enthusiastic about addressing the 'economic crisis'. Higher education played a major role in that plan. Indeed, it was under a Labor government that Australia witnessed major reforms to higher education – including the re-introduction of postgraduate and undergraduate fees as a principal source of income through HECS. The policy meant that all but a few Australian higher education students were required to pay part of the costs of their higher education. This was a national, income-contingent repayment for university tuition charges, which used the tax system as the collection agency.[1] HECS delivered a mechanism which, over the years, came to replace public investment in higher education with private revenue.

There were many policy intentions said to have informed HECS, including:

- national 'economic recovery' through wealth production (i.e. human capital investment);
- resolving 'equity problems' associated with the costs of higher education and the 'middle-class base of university students';
- accessing funds to invest in universities (the claim that HECS was implemented to secure the finances needed to bolster universities and make Australia internationally competitive).

Plotting policy-making communities

Elias's figuration model, like network theory, informs a first step of defining the parameters of policy-making groups, which in this case extended further than the inner sanctum of government and players like John Dawkins, Paul Keating, Peter Walsh, Ralf Willis, etc. to incorporate the Australian Taxation Office, media and other interest groups. Such mapping exercises also need to document the influence of precursors, like Labor's earlier debates on social equity, human capital and the economic imperatives of globalization, as well as the policies of Whitlam (1972–5) and the unsuccessful attempts by the Liberal National Coalition (1976 and 1982) to reintroduce certain tuition fees (a defeat caused by the ALP and the Democrats combining to challenge the Fraser government's fees proposal). This is where discourse analysis can play a critical role in demonstrating how a particular narrative informs policy, experience and action.

Documenting the 'I' perspective

Once key players have been identified, an inquiry using Elias's framework entails accessing the 'I' perspective from the various players. It would entail accessing insider accounts from people like Finance Minister Peter Walsh about why he argued for HECS and why the abolition of university fees by the Whitlam government failed in respect of achieving its equity objectives.

Similarly, accessing the 'I' perspective from politicians like John Dawkins can reveal a rationale for his push for 'economic sobriety', and see whether it related to attempts counter 'the damage' to Labor's reputation 'caused by the Whitlam experiment'. Accessing the 'I' perspective from key ALP members more broadly would provide a sense of the policy process in the context of Labor's anti-fee platform. Similarly, key advisers like Australian National University (ANU) academic Bruce Chapman, identified as 'the architect' of HECS, would also be revealing. Research of this kind can show how key players saw policy 'developments', and how their intentions, aspirations and ideas altered as events unfolded.

Documenting the 'we' perspectives

Detailing the 'we' perspective can make known how different players saw their attachments and how alliances altered. When applied to the then Federal Government Ministry it can help reveal how membership of 'we' groups changed. Such an inquiry can reveal, for example, how politicians like the Hawke government's first Minister for Education Susan Ryan, the only member of government carried over from the Whitlam era, was so quickly marginalized for 'not playing the game'. It may reveal how her continued opposition to the re-introduction of fees altered policy alliances and led to her being sacked as Education Minister and to the introduction of sweeping changes to the ministerial structure of the Hawke government three days after it was re-elected in July 1987. It was a change that saw the

Ministry of Education taken away from Ryan and handed to the economist John Dawkins, who became the minister for a new super-Department of Employment, Education and Training.

Documenting policy-making from the 'we' perspective can also facilitate inquiry into the role of human agency, moral emotions like loyalty and 'Laborists' values' like solidarity as various forms of opposition continued from players such as Susan Ryan, Senator Olive Zakharov and Hugh Hudson, to name a few.

This approach highlights the collective nature of policy outcomes like HECS rather than viewing outcomes as the product of John Dawkins' individual intent.

Inquiry from the 'they' perspective

How did policy-makers see 'they' – as 'them' or 'Other'? Such research can make known who saw whom as opponents and how different players situated themselves. Such an inquiry can tell us how those perceptions influenced the thoughts and actions of policy-makers, and also how different perspectives and actions shape policy.

It can reveal how politicians such as the then Prime Minister Bob Hawke, or John Dawkins, saw and responded to the Australian Taxation Office when it first refused to comply, refusing to collect fees on behalf of the government. It can reveal how members of 'new Labor' saw Whitlamites, and how they viewed media reports that 'Labor governments were fiscally incompetent'.

While I do not have the space in this article to fully articulate how Elias's model works, I argue that, in conjunction with discourse analysis, it provides a basis for a sociology of policy. Hopefully this brief illustration serves to indicate how it does so.

Conclusion

The liberal idea of the individual and of policy as rational action ignores the creative role of experts in discovering problems and overlooks the contingency of policy (i.e. the disorderly, variable human character of policy-making). It fails to notice how complex and fragmentary policy communities or networks develop connections and shape ideas, political agendas and policy. In particular, the notion of policy as rational action neglects the confusion and malevolence that characterize state policy-making, and ignores the possibility that some policy-makers can operate in a delusional state about what is happening. There are well-documented cases of policy-making elites intentionally generating fictive accounts of what they are doing. Typically this involves actions that, without the veil of secrecy or deceit, would otherwise invite criticism domestically or internationally.

Policy-makers are also sometimes misguided, ignorant or unaware of their intentions, which may contain a mix of actual problem-solving along

with fictive problem-solving. This is to say nothing of their remaining ignorant of, or in a state of denial about, the impact of their policies. Moreover, national and institutional leaders have a vested interest in maintaining a problem-free public image, particularly when the problems have the potential to seriously undermine the credibility of their regime or establishment (Cohen, 2001).

There are good reasons for not always accepting the declared intentions of policy-makers at face value. There are also good reasons for not assuming that establishing the relationship between policy intent and outcomes involves simply tracing the funnel of causality from intent through a narrowing path to the outcome of a specific policy. That overlooks the role of particular discursive traditions, the politics of discourse, party politics and government politics. If we want to understand policy, we cannot afford to neglect the pre-decision agenda-setting processes that involve a mélange of competing intentions and complex interpersonal, formal and informal communications.

The key to understanding policy intent or the impetus behind policies lies in an examination of how people operate while contesting their interests, ideas and choices. As I argued, Elias's 'personal pronoun model' offers a practical contribution to a sociology of policy. His work, in conjunction with discourse analysis, provides a basis for developing a sociology of policy-making that acknowledges human agency and the collective and highly social nature of policy-making.

Note

1 Those 'developments' also included:

- the abolition of the tertiary binary system, which saw the amalgamation of the 19 universities and 46 colleges of advanced education (CAEs) across Australia;
- the centralization of federal education bureaucracy into a super-department creating the Department of Employment, Education and Training, plus a range of other developments;
- the abolition of independent statutory authorities (i.e. Commonwealth Schools Commission, the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission, the Australian Council for Employment and Training) and their replacement with non-independent bodies;
- the reform of university-based management and decision-making processes, including changes to the operations of governing bodies and academic boards, and the 'improvement' of middle management;
- provision for private institutions under state auspices in the overall framework of higher education;
- the centralization of research funds via the establishment of the new Australian Research Council as the key source of advice on research expenditure;
- the implementation of a range of 'efficiency' measures to 'free up existing resources ('selective early retirement', 'reform' of the tenure system of academic staff);
- increased 'accountability measures'.

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