Interpretative and constructionist accounts: their usefulness for understanding "social problems"

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Whilst there are very few academics who would advocate a wholly positivist approach to the study of social problems, there is a tendency to valorise supposedly objective, quantitative studies in the field of social policy. This tendency has been reinforced by government's demand for research that provides 'evidence'. Briefly stated, governments now encourage researchers to identify causal components underpinning problems such as homelessness and then make policy recommendations to ameliorate them. In this paper I consider the merits of the contribution of constructionist perspectives for social policy research that challenge hegemonic understandings of social problems. I begin by tracing some of the influential critiques that emerged from the 1970s onwards including symbolic interactionism, Foucauldian inspired discourse analysis, constructionism and more recently actor network theory. The main part of the paper provides an assessment of these approaches with reference to UK housing policy, noting both their limitations and strengths. Finally, the paper considers the future tasks for critically orientated social policy scholarship at a time of increasing austerity and social polarisation. Can constructionist and other interpretative accounts provide insights for understanding the failures that beset contemporary policy making in areas such as housing?

Introduction: the legacies of positivism on social policy

Whilst many researchers have embraced a critical orientation towards government policymaking, it remains the case that those who seek to influence government share some of the assumptions of positivism that reduce the processes that constitute policymaking to a series of input and outputs. In part, this is because government agencies as part of their concern with impact, have funded research that is explicitly practice focused and purportedly 'policy relevant'. The influence of positivism in the realm of social policy can be traced back to the late 19th century and the efforts to establish a scientific basis for the study of populations. Much of the positivist informed research paradigm seeks to collect evidence to make judgements about gaps in service provision or test the veracity of existing services. Whilst the research within this paradigm addresses some of the short-term expectations of funding agencies, the studies are often narrowly consigned to implementation issues and so are unlikely to

address wider and more critical challenges that might arise in policy settings. Specifically, positivist informed research, because it is largely reactive to the demands of government, often addresses short term administrative policies. It is therefore most unusual for government agencies to commission explicitly critical accounts that emphasise structural issues for example. Furthermore, the research that is funded tends to make recommendations that are managerial in scope i.e. limited to issues of budgets, service delivery and piecemeal reform. In its contemporary guise, positivism is often couched in the language of 'evidence based' research with its advocates arguing that research should conform to experimental methods that are common in the natural sciences. As Bacchi (2016:2) argues, under this model 'the main research involves discovering associations among identified factors to discover 'what works''. Positivism, for this reason, has been judged by its critics as an inappropriate paradigm for research that is seriously engaged with the entrenched power inequalities and class-based fissures that underpin many of the social welfare problems that have emerged in recent years.

The genesis of a critical turn in social policy

Positivist approaches to the study of social policy have often been the subject of debate but it was during the 1950s that scholars began to adopt a more critical approach to social policy issues. One example was Wright Mills (1959:9) who drew a distinction between 'personal troubles' and 'public issues'. He was interested in how private personal troubles become public ones. For Wright Mills, the question was why are some troubles viewed as requiring societal responses whilst others remain individual and subject to behavioural change? Wright Mills' distinction between public problems and private troubles identified the power relationships and structural issues that underpin social problems and the necessity of a political response. Yet, his paradigm for research still assumed that 'problems' are largely objective social issues.

As Kemeny (2003) noted, it was the 1960s that marked a turning point in the debates from positivist and more interpretative or constructionist accounts to social policy problems. Important studies included Howard Becker's (1966) account of the veracity of conflict and consensus approaches for understanding social problems and Gusfield's study (1967) of prohibition and the influence of the temperance movement in the US; recognising the importance of social movements and interest groups in shaping perceptions as to what counts as a social problem. Other studies, worthy of note, include Schattschneider (1960) and Bachrach & Baratz (1970). Both these studies recognised

that social problems only become accepted following periods of intense advocacy, and political debate (see Jacobs et al 2003 & Jacobs and Manzi 2000 for discussions). In practice, social problems require a set of adverse conditions, the input of powerful coalitions that utilise advocacy and media campaigns to ensure that issues gain traction in the policy environment. Other important studies include Spector and Kitsuse (2001), Schneider and Kitsuse (1984) and Rochefort and Cobb (1993), all of whom recognised how different groups seek to establish an issue as a social problem, or alternatively cast doubt on an issue being framed as requiring attention.

In a fascinating article, Kemeny (2003) noted how research on social problems in the post-war period were informed by positivist accounts that assumed that social problems were subject to objective assessment. Kemeny points to Merton's (1951) distinction between 'manifest' social problems that are enduring and those that are 'latent' – the latter including those not yet recognised as problems, because they were at odds with mainstream values. There was, as Kemeny points out, no attempt to problematise or explain the conditions that shape the emergence of these latent problems.

These studies identified by Kemeny (2003) are insightful, not least because they establish that issues to be treated as policy problems require not just their identification but a set of discursive strategies to maintain their prominence. In other words, an underlying condition or a trouble affecting a large cohort of households is not sufficient for the problem to become the object of a policy response. Critical scholarship has, for this reason, looked closely at the factors that determine when an issue becomes prominent as a policy concern. Both Stone, (1989) and Fischer (2003), for example, have argued that for a problem to be taken seriously requires a set of images that attribute cause, blame and responsibility. Whilst Hajer (1993) argued that there are at least three conditions which need to be met for problems to achieve prominence and to require amelioration. First, a narrative of the problem's origin and development has to be articulated, second a supportive coalition to reinforce this narrative should be organised and thirdly, they require a coalition of agencies to ensure that this narrative is addressed in the form of policy. Hajer's work has therefore been an important influence on constructionist approaches to social problems and in analysing potential policy responses.

The interest in power and conflict

The dissatisfaction with the positivist paradigm underlying social policy research has led to inquiries that explicitly address the broader power relations

that shape politics. From the late 1970s accounts appeared in journals such as 'Critical Social Policy' that eschewed managerial reforms as appropriate policy responses to societal challenges. One of the influential bodies of research was inspired by Marxist political economy (Merrett 1975; Castells 1978 & 1979; Ginsberg 1979) wherein researchers sought to understand welfare policy in the context of class conflict. So, for example, it was common to see welfare reforms as the outcome of an accommodation between different class interests (Castells 1978 & 1979). The most important class-based studies undertaken by writers such as Castells considered the role played by urban social movements in shaping collective consumption practices. These studies, while valuable, remained focussed on the structural aspects of policymaking but with the benefit of hindsight, they appear overly deterministic.

Since the advent of the global financial crisis of 2008, Marxist inspired interpretations have once again become influential but this time around are altogether more sophisticated for paying greater heed to the capacity of individuals and organisations to effect change and the moralistic assumptions that underpin their endeavours (see Flew 2014 for discussion). And yet within media and government policy settings these critical accounts have only gained limited traction. Governments still portray social issues such as poverty, housing affordability, unemployment, obesity and drug addiction in ways that are at best simplistic and at worst, misleading. We are told, for example that many of these problems can be sourced to the failure of individuals to take responsibility and that governments cannot be deemed culpable for their proliferation amongst the population.

Why is there such a gulf between critical forms of scholarship and governmental understandings of social issues? Most probably, the distinction is just one of the consequences of the retreat of government in welfare provision that has been evident since the late 1970s. The increasing attribution of 'social problems' as personal failures makes it easier for governments to claim that their interventions should be consigned to incremental reforms rather than large scale interventions that address poverty and inequality. In contrast to the New Deal of the 1930s or the large public housing building programmes of the 1950s and 1960s, welfare policy in the 21st century is largely reactive, without ambition and so, less likely to make a significant impact. Research too has become narrower in scope as evidenced by the proliferation of statistical and quantitative studies that bypass difficult political challenges.

Methods for constructionist research

Having sketched the historical context that inform critical research investigations, the next part of the paper outlines the methods that are often deployed. Constructionist accounts not only address structural questions, but also pay heed to the individual accounts of actors involved in policymaking and the production of policy in the form of texts. Common methods that are used to explore policy include: discourse analysis that attends to the performative role of language in politics; Foucauldian inspired historical scholarship; and actor network and assemblage theory. Each of these approaches are briefly discussed below.

Discourse analysis

Discourse analysis as a method of analysing social problems foregrounds the critical role played by language in justifying policy interventions, determining an agenda for action, and influencing the nature of responses to identified problems. This approach studies techniques that governmental agencies and policy actors deploy to advance their objectives, to mobilise support and minimise opposition to proposed measures. The most influential approach within policy studies is known as 'critical discourse analysis' (CDA) established by Norman Fairclough (1992 & 2003). In Discourse and Social Change (1992) Fairclough advances a tiered framework that encompasses: a close attention to vocabulary, grammar and text structure; the social production of text; and the broad macro analysis that encompasses a political economic setting. In practice a CDA pays close attention to terminology, genre and discursive strategies that feature in government documents and statements to reinforce an ideological position and to facilitate a desired process of change. An example of a policy study inspired by CDA policy research is Jacobs (2004) which examined a waterfront renewal project in Chatham, UK.

Foucauldian scholarship

The second methodology often associated with constructionist approaches is Foucauldian informed analysis, it takes an explicitly historical approach to the study of social problems. Foucauldian methodologies aim to show how language, text and social practices are reflective of wider historical and social shifts. For Foucault (1994:456) 'a critique does not consist in saying that things aren't good the way they are. It consists in seeing on what type of assumptions of familiar notions, of established, unexamined ways of thinking the accepted practices are based'. Foucault uses the term 'regimes of truth' to denote the

basis for understanding the world and suggests that these 'regimes of truth' can be altered by historical shifts in the exercise of power. A Foucauldian analysis does not follow any prescribed set of methods, but those who draw on his work see discourse as a particular form of knowledge which shapes social interaction and institutional behaviour (Rose 2000:136). Unlike critical discourse analysis, there is little interest in considering 'surface' meanings as a way to understand 'deeper' realities. In fact, this approach would be eschewed because it is the way that power is enacted that is of interest. Some of the most insightful Foucauldian discussions of social problems have looked at how neoliberal policymakers have appropriated terms such as 'community' and 'choice' to advance policy reform. Foucauldian ideas have also been an important influence on what is known as post-structural research that attends to the practices of government and the uses of technologies to establish rule. As Foucauldian scholars Dean and Hindness (1998:8) explain Government is 'not a definite and uniform set of institutions nor as the realisation of a certain set of political or constitutional principles… [but] 'an inventive, strategic, technical and artful set of 'assemblages' fashioned from diverse elements put together in novel ways and rationalised in relation to specific government objectives and goals'.

In recent years, Foucauldian scholarship has been embraced by researchers who identify as post-structuralist. As a key exponent of post-structural analysis of social problems for example, Carol Bacchi (2016) attends to the way problems are represented. Rather than seeing problems as somehow an issue to be addressed, she describes policies as productive in that they form a component of governing. As Bacchi (2016:8) explains «The key to understanding how governing takes place, therefore is to study how governing practices, understood broadly problematize issues». Policy initiatives always contain an implicit representation of the problem. So, problems, for Bacchi, are best understood as governmental interventions. In other words, 'problematisations thus become part of how we are governed. That is governing takes place through the ways in which 'problems' are constituted in policies' (2016:8). Bacchi's argument provides a way to understand how problems are manufactured by government to establish a rationality for policymaking.

Actor Network theory and Assemblage theory

All of the above-mentioned approaches have been extensively debated in the social science literature. More recently other explanations of social problems have been influenced by developments in social theory. Two of the most notable are actor network theory (ANT) that draw upon the writings of Bruno

Latour (2005), and assemblage theory (see DeLanda 2006) both of which have gained influence amongst geographers writing on social policy issues. In short, actor network and assemblage theory both emphasise the multiple connections informing the production and implementation of policy (see De Roo & Hillier 2016). In particular, they highlight the role of non-human actors – including technology and other material artefacts as significant influences on the policy process. Attention is thus paid to social technical relations and how these inform narratives of problem making (see Gabriel & Jacobs 2008 and Dobson 2015 for discussions). Having outlined the broad approaches, the next section considers how these theories have informed the development of a constructionist housing research agenda.

Constructionist informed approaches to housing policy

The framework proposed by Hajer and other constructionists (see also Fischer 2003) mentioned at the start of the paper can help us understand how specific problems can become prominent in media discourses. In the area of housing policy, constructionist research has coalesced around the work of writers such as Jim Kemeny (1981, 1983,1992 & 2003). In emphasising the power of interest groups and coalitions to influence policy (see Baumgartner & Leech 1998; Jacobs et al: 2003; Binderkrantz 2005; and Fopp: 2008) constructionist accounts seek to uncover how some issues identified as 'problems' can gain traction with policymakers whilst other issues seem to fall by the wayside. Therefore, considerable emphasis is placed on framing contemporary policy historically to discern long-term trajectories and ruptures (see Mee 2003).

The representation of public housing

The merits of a constructionist contribution can be demonstrated with reference to public housing and homeless in the United Kingdom; each of these is discussed in turn. In the contemporary era, policymakers tend to frame public housing through the lens of neoliberal ideology. Hence social housing is treated as a residual tenure that is suitable only for the most disadvantaged. Furthermore, we are told, public housing leads to problematic outcomes, incentivises tenants to become welfare dependent and is costly (and inefficient) to maintain. Instead of providing increased funding for public housing, governments have therefore taken measures to absolve themselves of responsibility for the sector, privatising the stock, providing incentives to encourage homeownership and (in the case of Australia) subsidising private landlords

through tax concessions. Many new tenants living in public housing have reduced security of tenure and some are only offered short term tenancies. In short, there has been a demonization of public housing over the last 30 or so years that has accentuated the shortage of accommodation and led to homeless and low-income households having to rely on an insecure and poorly regulated private rental sector.

A constructionist analysis of public housing would explore why this neo-liberal portrayal has endured and ask questions such as: who stands to benefit from the narrative that it this is a failed tenure that has contributed to welfare dependency? Drawing upon a historical analysis, it would compare contemporary interpretations with earlier accounts; for example, by contrasting contemporary policies from those offered in the 1950s to the late 1960s. It would be apparent, even from a most superficial reading of this period that public housing was portrayed in a very different light and rendered, not so much as a failure, but an emblem of the welfare state's progress to address both inequality and poverty (Boughton 2018). Two questions follow from this comparison between the present and the past. Why did public housing lose such support amongst policymakers? And why was public housing recast so thoroughly as a symbol of failure? The hegemonic explanation for the loss of support for public housing is that it was often poorly managed and overly bureaucratic in ways that impacted negatively upon tenants. It was also judged to be an expensive form of provision that housed many tenants who could either access owner occupation or rent in the private sector. In the 1980s, the UK Conservative government (supported by centre-right academics and a mass media) determined that a large public housing sector undermined competition and economic growth. As a way to justify this attack, the government claimed that individual tenants would have more autonomy and choice if local authorities transferred their stock to housing associations (Pawson & Mullins 2010). Similarly, policy reforms designed to establish opportunities for commercial organisations to deliver social welfare services drew on similar managerial-informed language and social practices.

Very soon after this sustained attack, attitudes towards public housing became more hostile (which was not limited to a UK context). Public housing was associated with crime and anti-social behaviour (see Hanley 2017 and Boughton 2018). New legislation was introduced to weaken the capacity of local housing authorities to invest in public housing, and expenditure cuts dramatically reduced local authorities repair and maintenance programmes. By the mid 1990s, public housing was recast as an unviable form of tenure. Discursively, the attack on public housing drew upon long-standing neoliberal inspired narratives about individual choice, competition and the problems

of bureaucracy and hierarchical governance. Neoliberal criticisms of public housing were reinforced by an accompanying narrative about the merits of owner-occupation as the preferred tenure choice. Government subsidies, in the form of tax relief, sale of council property and grants, were therefore provided to prospective homeowners as an incentive to develop the sector (so further undermining the rationale for municipal provision).

It should therefore be apparent that a constructionist perspective offers a quite different explanation of the demise of public housing in the UK. First, it would identify the powerful interest groups that stand to gain from the commodification of housing and the commercial (and political) opportunities that might arise. Second, it would look at the capacity of oppositional forces to challenge the negative portrayal of public housing such as welfare pressure groups and municipal landlords. It would ask questions such as who stands to gain or lose from the reframing of public housing? Constructionist accounts would also identify the significant profit-making opportunities offered to banks and other lending institutions during a period when government policy was determined upon ensuring increased levels of homeownership in the UK. Adopting this viewpoint necessitates an historical approach that charts the continuities and ruptures in housing policy as well as a critical scrutiny of the assumptions underlying what are presented as 'objective' processes.

The problem of homelessness

The second example involves the construction of the problem of homelessness. Historically, being 'homeless' was seen as a personal failure but in the mid 1940s influential policymakers acknowledged that homelessness could be attributed to the limited housing options, particularly in cities that were experiences significant damage during aerial bombing raids during World War 2. Underpinned by a commitment to state intervention in social welfare, large scale municipal housing programmes were undertaken in Britain until the mid 1970s to meet severe accommodation needs and to replace 19th century terraced housing that had become dilapidated. In the late 1970s, the more generous attitude to the plight of homeless people reached a highpoint, with the passing of the UK 1977 Housing (Homeless Persons) Act that made it mandatory for local authorities to assist people deemed homeless. Whilst such homeless policies had always been conditional (and dependent on strict eligibility criteria) these approached changed sharply in the 1980s when a more restrictive welfare regime was established in the UK following the election of the Conservative party in 1979. Whilst the Homeless Persons Act 1977 remained on the statute book, the lack of new local authority housing stock (and

the sale of existing council property) meant there was far less accommodation available for both low-income and homeless households. At the same time the government introduced an increasingly restrictive (and punitive) system of social security payments. As a consequence, increasing numbers of homeless people were offered temporary accommodation, such as motels whilst waiting for a permanent property. It was during this period that more homeless people resorted to living on the streets, particularly in London and sympathy towards homeless people waned. Media stories about begging often portrayed those living on the street as unscrupulous or exploitative. The important point here is that the definition of homelessness was subject to competing interpretations as policymakers and welfare lobbyists advanced differential policy interventions. Framing homeless as a symptom of government policymaking, as welfare agencies often claim, establishes the case for funding interventions to assist homeless people. Attributing homeless as a consequence of a lack of individual responsibility, on the other hand, provides a justification for cuts in funding or narrowly consigning funds to training programmes for those vulnerable to homelessness.

Criticisms of constructionism

Constructionism and other interpretative accounts have been subject to criticism. It is claimed that constructionist approaches pay too much attention to ideas and discourse rather than material practices (for a discussion see Jacobs et al 2003). Yet this criticism can be easily addressed as it is based on a misapprehension. Social policy researchers who identify with constructionism would reject any suggestion that ideas have a distinct ontology. Furthermore, ideas in circulation are actively produced and maintained through written texts and the spoken word. In other words, ideas do not have an independent basis that is separate from the material world. Another criticism often made is that constructionist accounts are too agency focussed and do not consider in sufficient detail the wider political economy in which government actions are embedded. Yet again, this criticism can be dismissed because constructionist accounts do purposefully seek to position contemporary representation of problems in a broader, structural context.

A more incisive criticism can be made against those constructionist approaches that have sought to use methods associated with Actor Network Theory (ANT) (see Cowen & Carr 2008). In practice, research informed by ANT and assemblage theory extends the field of enquiry to new areas but the insights it offers often fall short of what is promised. One particular criticism

of ANT is that it gives little or no guidance as to the choices and selections that are required in any research project. This criticism is insightful especially in areas of social policy, where the field of enquiry can be too broad.

Conclusion

In the introduction to this paper, I stated that constructionist research on social problems does not fit well with the expectations of funding agencies and government bodies who often eschew critical studies in favour of narrowly framed investigations that foreground managerial or administrative concerns. As such, constructionist informed research has generally been undertaken without funding support and published mainly in academic and theoretical journals. Despite the funding shortfall, constructionist research has begun to have wider traction for understanding how policies are advanced and how problem creation and representation are a feature of government practice. As I have shown in the field of housing studies, scholars offer an analysis that highlights the conflicts that arise between different interest groups. Rather than consign the housing system as a failure, or in a state of crisis for not being able to deliver affordable housing in sufficient numbers to mitigate homelessness and poverty, scholars are now viewing the system as a successful vehicle for wealth accumulation by landlord investors, homeowners and banks. The term 'housing crisis' is often used to denote the contemporary era as more households struggle to meet the costs of their mortgage or find suitable rental accommodation. And yet the term 'crisis', is probably the wrong term as it conveys a sense of temporary problem that is amenable to a quick term fix, rather than an enduring phenomenon that is underpinned by policies that support speculative investment in housing. A constructionist approach to housing seeks to uncover the power dynamics and interests that operate in resisting progressive reforms. Very often scholars have sought to explore some of the ways that policy language is carefully presented by stakeholders to deflect criticism and convey a sense of purpose (Hastings 2004; Stonehouse et al 2015). So, for example terms such as 'partnership', 'renewal' and 'regeneration' are deployed in government policy documents to deflect attention away from actions that might generate political opposition such as 'privatisation'. In the areas of health and education terms such as 'choice' and 'customer' are used to disguise cuts in public funding.

Research informed by construction paradigms has led to a more politicised understanding of the practices of government in particular and help to shed light on the way that problem identification and responses are per-

formative activities designed to convey authority and legitimacy. As well as heuristic insights, there is relevance in terms of practice by shifting the focus of analysis away from administrative enquires that take on trust the benevolence of government policy and towards a critique of policymaking and the managerialist solutions offered by government and housing practitioners. Constructionist accounts are all the more relevant during a period where governments agencies have had to operate within a period of financial austerity and budget cuts.

Finally, to reiterate one of the claims made at the start of the paper, whilst constructionist accounts provide a heuristic explanation of the policy process, their application is likely to remain confined to scholarly academic journals because of the inclination amongst government funding agencies to privilege research that offers 'practical' outcomes. The claim that evidence-based analysis represents the benchmark for social research is part of a trend within government to relegate more critical forms of investigation to the margins and to consign theoretical work as irrelevant. Sadly, university institutions have been too willing to comply with this governmental diktat and there is now considerable pressure for researchers to demonstrate social and economic 'impact' in their scholarship. Researchers should continue to resist this pressure and offer interpretations of the policy process that are incisive, critical and challenging of the dominant interest groupings in society.

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