



Policy, Reconfigured: Critical Policy Studies and the (false) Beneficence of Subjects

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Abstract

In this brief essay, I outline a core concern of educational policy research that often is left unattended – the hidden benefits of policy. I then share a host of studies that have taken a critical stance toward policy research, strategically engaging the masked, unacknowledged, and latent ideological consequences of policy texts. These studies help illustrate ways that educational policy has become a normative social practice for securing the status-quo and perpetuating dominant ideological discourses. I conclude by offering thoughts toward a reconfiguration of policy that encourages a compassionate, reflexive, living interrogation of how discourse begets material reality.

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Policy, reconfigured: Critical Policy Studies and the (false) beneficence of subjects in higher education

Policy (n): an instantiated effort to regulate activity.

Policy (v): regulating activity

Policy generally is not understood as a verb. However, as a pretext to my essay, I put forward that we must think of policy as both act and the action, as both intervention and the intervening, as both movement and the moving. The usefulness of this thought is not to suggest we begin espousing ways “to policy higher education,” necessarily, but rather to assist in recognizing ways that power circulates across, betwixt, between, throughout, and within policy. It is a playful intellectual exercise that affords me a pathway to understanding how policy and higher education might be configured in ways that reveal its benefits and beneficence to various peoples (*plural intended*), as well as the differential and dissident experiences of some historically marginalized groups with policy.

In this brief essay, I outline a core concern of educational policy research that oft is left unattended – the hidden benefits of policy. I then share a host of studies that have taken a critical stance toward policy research, strategically engaging the masked, unacknowledged, and latent ideological consequences of policy texts. These studies help illustrate ways that educational policy can function as a normative social practice for securing the status-quo and perpetuating dominant ideological discourses.

Policy studies generally assume that policy reflects societal values (Allan, 2010). Institutions adopt policies to ensure they operate congruent to their values. Governments enact policy to regulate the polity according to broad social norms. Policy enables certain activity and constrains others, as an expression of political values – values that determine an architecture of human relations. Yet, there is discord across policy studies activity regarding the role of values in the doing of policy.

Policy textbooks in education traditionally understand policy from a rational scientific perspective. Steeped in positivist epistemology, policy studies tend to view policy analysis as a value-neutral endeavor, tied to a linear logic or procedure intended to assemble a set of facts that allow for a conclusion about policy solutions to social problems (Allan, 2010; Cochran & Malone, 1999; Stone, 2002). Rational scientific approaches seek objectivity, neutrality, and adhere to scientific methodological norms. As such, policy activity is generally relegated to the province of experts entrusted to execute an appropriate formula for designing, implementing, and evaluating policy initiatives. These dominant frameworks, which cut across disciplines and

educational sectors, can be critiqued for failing to account for the political nature of how policy problems, targets, and solutions are produced through culturally-mediated and historically bound social process (Allan, 2010; Scheurich, 1994; Stone, 2002).

In opposition to dominant frameworks for understanding policy, *critical policy studies* has emerged as a field of research in education seeking to understand the hows and wherefores of policy. Critical policy studies assumes that policy is inherently value-laden and contentious – across its development, adoption, implementation, outcomes, analysis *and its language*. As such, issues of power and power relations become pre-eminent concerns in critical policy studies.

By making power a central concern, critical policy analysis recognizes that policy is not only a product of societal values, but also *produces social value itself*. That is to say, policy can make possible certain ways of understanding that previously were unknown, changing the discursive terrain of social concerns and promoting particular value orientations. For example, in my own work with Susana Hernández around undocumented immigrants and higher education, we have found that in-state resident tuition policy has generated a new identity – the alien student – providing a new subjective position for certain students to occupy, other students to know themselves against, and publics to debate as a desired subject in democracy (Gildersleeve & Hernández, 2010; 2012). Such analyses are made possible by recognizing power as a productive force, rather than strictly repressive – a point I will return to later. Yes, policy regulates human activity. However, policy also promises new possibilities, such as the alien student.

Policy Discourse Analysis & Higher Education

As an approach to policy analysis within the broader family of critical policy studies, policy discourse analysis stems from dynamic intersections of critical discourse analysis, feminism, post-structuralism, and critical policy studies generally (Allan, Iverson, & Ropers-Huilman, 2010). While there is no singular uniformed method established within policy discourse analysis, scholars engaging critically with policy discourses are marked by a few generally consensual presuppositions.

First, *discourse* in such work refers more to knowledge production than to any given text or use of language. Yet, discourse is produced through texts and language use, configured across social practices, institutions, and power relations within a particular system of knowledge. When policy texts are examined, discourse can be understood as the thought and action of the text.

Second, *power* in policy discourse analysis is understood as a productive, rather than repressive force (Allan, Iverson, & Ropers-Huilman, 2010). Exercises of power produce new imaginings, practices, identities, and institutions. These may in turn serve repressive functions, but power-as-exercise must itself be understood as neutral. The exercise of power, however, is inherently value-laden and ideological. Hence, power circulates by way of discourse. It is through discourse that power produces the imaginings, practices, identities, institutions, etc., that constitute knowledge.

Third, *policy* is inherently value-laden, ideological, and operates via discourse – the power/knowledge of regulation. No part of policy – its development, adoption, implementation, or evaluation – can be divorced from the subjectivities produced by its discourses, nor from the ideologies that become invested in its discourses. As such, policy, from critical policy studies' perspectives, is a site of contestation and conversation. Policy texts, then, can inform an understanding of political life, possible subaltern positions, oppositional experiences, and in a U.S. context, the (confused) state of the American democratic project.

Policy discourse analysis is a critical policy study that seeks to un-silence the discursive framings of policy initiatives. This line of inquiry strives to make plain the invisible, put a megaphone to quiet, and un-hide the masked meanings produced through policy discourses that often become the reified realities of hegemonic state power. Methodologically, therefore, policy discourse analysis, as a strand of critical policy studies, is situated quite well to tackle a question such as, "Who really benefits from policy?"

Specific methods used to interrogate these presuppositions range from the radically feminist to the moderately poststructural and the indulgently postmodern (note: I mean to be playful, not incredulous in these descriptions). In describing policy discourse analysis as a hybrid methodology, Elizabeth Allan (2010) notes:

Influenced by textual analysis, critical discourse analysis, and poststructural methods of deconstruction, archaeology, genealogy, and feminist appropriations of these, policy discourse analysis provides a specific method for examining policy discourses and the subject positions produced by them. (p. 30)

I wish to emphasize Allan's last notion, "the subject positions produced by them" as particularly pertinent to the work of this special issue of the *Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis*. As a project of critical policy studies, policy discourse analysis affords a dynamic technique for scholars to reconsider the "who" of policy and the policy "who." That is to say, examining the subject positions produced by policy discourses can shed light on the beneficiaries of policy in

more nuanced, sophisticated understandings than the simple dichotomously rational configuring's of traditional policy analysis. Some examples follow.

In her 2003 *Harvard Educational Review* article, Elizabeth Allan explores ways that discourses of femininity, access, and professionalism construct women as subjects in universities. Drawing on her analysis of women's commission reports from four universities over a 25-year period, Allan's analysis reveals how these reports, which were intended as policy mechanisms to support women in academia, indeed perpetuate their non-dominant status on campus. The logic of these reports relies on ideologies that recirculate common myths of a women's experience. As such, the reports under Allan's scrutiny produce subject positions that emplace women as subaltern in the university's organization. Generating women's position on campus in these ways allows men, the historically dominant gender on campus, the ability to perpetuate their privilege and dominance without cause. That is, the institution can stand behind a responsive document that appears to benefit gender equity while re-enacting traditional structures through the discourse of that very document.

Estela Bensimon's 1995 *Harvard Educational Review* article provides what she named a "rebellious reading" (p. 596) of total quality management (TQM) strategies that became vogue higher education administrative practices in the 1990's. Bensimon explicitly named her interest in these policy developments as one to "reject the assumption that language such as 'customer satisfaction defines quality' expresses a disinterested or objective meaning of 'quality'" (p. 595). Bensimon's reading of TQM refutes realist assumptions of the neutrality of management ideas and provides a compelling argument that recognizes "we must be careful not to deceive ourselves into believing that 'consensual goals' are anything other than the particular goals of individuals or groups with the power, resources, and status to represent their own needs as universal" (p. 607). Her careful analysis of the postulates of TQM reveals the underlying patriarchal system that tends to disallow difference and invest in sameness. Thus, TQM, although popular in administrative regimes focused on customer satisfaction, actually discounts huge swaths of academe's "customers," (i.e., women, people-of-color, gays and lesbians, and other dissonant subjectivities).

In our recent article published by the *International Journal of Multicultural Education* (2012), my colleague, Susana Hernández, and I analyzed state legislation that extended in-state resident tuition benefits to undocumented residents in public higher education institutions. As part of a broader policy discourse analysis project, our work seeks to understand, in part, how undocumented students are subject to new identities through the workings of these policies. Some obvious findings point to new identity constructions that draw on a mixture of

state, federal, and local discourses of immigration. Less obvious, and more nuanced readings of these policy texts reveal ways that these policies, which progressives tout as necessary for comprehensive immigration reform, can in fact inscribe undocumented students as less-worthy, less-deserving, and less-real than their citizen counterparts. Thus, hegemonic power structures that reify citizens as real students and undocumented students as ‘other’ persist.

In her 2008 article in *Equity and Excellence in Education*, Susan Iverson examines 21 diversity action plans from U.S. land-grant universities. Her analysis of the discursive framing of diversity reveals a subject position of the “diverse individual,” who then is cast through market-driven discourses that objectify those who might fit the diverse individual identity. However, the diverse individual is not such a straight-forward subject position, as Iverson shares:

The diverse individual situated as a commodity, a social identity, produced by the marketplace discourse, is used strategically by the university to achieve institutional effectiveness, quality, and excellence, in order to acquire or maintain one’s reputation and competitive edge in the academic marketplace. In stark contrast, the change agent, an identity produced by a discourse of democracy, empowers diverse individuals to contest and resists normalizing powers. (p. 194)

Iverson’s analysis reveals much of what can be learned about contradictions in policy by examining the competing discourses that circulate through diversity action plans.

In a 2011 piece published by the *Peabody Journal of Education*, Aaron Kuntz, myself, and Penny Pasque examined the Obama Administration’s higher education policy platform, via the American Graduation Initiative. Our analysis emplaced the political rhetoric and the policy text itself within a broader social (and educational) context, drawing discursive connections across the Obama Administration’s platform and longstanding inequalities in education. Despite being lauded as a democratizing initiative, we reveal how the American Graduation Initiative relies on an abstraction of race – the discursive (un)rendering of race as a reality experienced by disenfranchised Americans, who then are constructed as “the American worker.” The American worker, although promulgated into postsecondary educational contexts, is only promised a future of depressed wage jobs that inevitably will be as scarce one day as her current job threatens to become today. Such ideological positioning suggests that the American Graduation Initiative, and the Obama Administrations broader higher education agenda seek to sustain, if not strengthen, educational stratification across racialized and classed configurations, despite its emphasis on providing educational opportunities for a broader group of individuals.

The beneficence of subjects

What these examples of policy discourse analysis show, in part, is the struggle for productive policy work that can demonstrate who *really* benefits from education policy. Taken together, as a selection of exemplars, these analyses might suggest that education policy generally benefits the status quo, even when it intervenes in normative educational practice. Of course, an equally compelling contribution from these examples is the notion that any understanding of policy is partial, making clear that as much as a policy's targeted subject, for example, undocumented students, might reap a material benefit, such as in-state resident tuition, there are discursive costs, which inevitably get reconfigured into material conditions. Thus, a status-quo nexus of disenfranchisement, privilege, and discrimination is allowed to pervasively reconstitute itself. Producing subjects through policy, therefore, may not be such a beneficent activity when assessed against broader social justice goals and outcomes.

Policy, reconfigured

Returning to my opening expression of policy as both noun and verb, I suggest that in many ways we actually do *policy people*. That is, we policy them into being, winning, losing, and not being – at least in a discursive sense. State legislatures are policy-ing undocumented students into national security concerns. Universities are policy-ing diverse individuals into commodities as well as change agents. Federal policy platforms are policy-ing people into low-wage workers. The pattern emerges that to policy a group of people seemingly inevitably short-changes their beneficence. As such, from a critical perspective, marginalized groups may seek to dodge, dart, hide from, or remain invisible from the policy practices of American education altogether. I am by no means arguing that marginalized groups shy away from the American democratic project. Quite the contrary – in dodging, darting, hiding, and remaining invisible from the dominant policy bulls-eye, dissidents can reconfigure policy, discursively and then fashion reality materially. In a sense, we can policy-back (verb) with policy (noun) that attends to the circulation of complicated, powerful, dynamic, and contradictory discourses. Perhaps, the dissident communities who too often are the targets of policy can policy with compassion, pluralism, and an emphatic reflexive notion of interrogation such that policy discourses live and breath in the open for all to engage. After all, policies are just words on a page.

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² See Note 2.