

Briefing Paper 96

Doing emotion, doing policy; the emotional role of ‘grassroots’ community activists in poverty policy-making

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Introduction

This research is rooted in a concern for the way policy is ‘done’ in practice. However, this interest in the everyday realities of policy-making poses a conceptual challenge to the researcher and the practitioner. The way the study of public policy has evolved privileged a conception of policy as an applied science. This tradition can be traced through the political science and public administration literature of the post-war years. In this approach, public policy is usually seen as rational, linear and located in a process which identifies problems or opportunities at the most productive level of analysis, the community’s interests in the matter and makes decisions based upon as much relevant data that optimise those interests.

Yet there is considerable empirical evidence which questions the validity of this rationalist conceptualisation of what is being ‘done’ when policy is made. If we look at the speech and acts that go into doing policy work and understanding what policy really means to participants, it becomes apparent that other things besides instrumental rationality are present too. In particular the relational, the argumentative and the emotional emerge as things that really matter to the course of public administration. With these relational, emotional qualities foregrounded policy takes on a much less teleological, product- and process-oriented appearance. Once its claims to perfectibility, objectivity and naturalness

have been compromised, policy-making becomes a culturally- and historically-situated cultural practice. If policy serves a symbolic and emotional cultural role as well as a rational, distributive one, it makes sense to consider how non-rational, non-instrumental ways of knowing and intervening in the world are brought to bear on the decision-making process.

If we are to analyse public administration it is essential to understand the practice of policy-making in all its non-rational, non-linear complexity, and ‘emotion’ as defined and understood by policy participants is an integral part of this silenced side of public administration.

The current research (which is still in progress) examines different understandings of the emotional role played by activist or ‘grassroots’ participants for those involved in policy-making. Drawing on findings from an ethnographic study of an interrelated cluster of anti-poverty policy-making forums in Scotland, it considers both what informants understand by ‘emotion’ and its role in policy-making from the point of view of informants themselves. In particular it focuses on participants’ understanding of the nature of emotion and some of the explicit and tacit ‘rules’ about who may be ‘emotional’, when they may do that and how emotion is to be expressed socially.

In addition to summarising the definitions of emotion that emerged from this ethnography, this briefing paper provides an overview of emerging findings about two key aspects of informants' practice; the special expectations policy forum participants have of activists and community organisation representatives around behaviour and language associated with 'the emotional' and participants' understandings of the relationship between emotion, authenticity and legitimate decision-making in policy.

Defining Emotion

This research set out to directly address emotion in public policy-making through ethnographic research and participant observation. This required a detailed examination of how participants in the forums understood emotion. This was done through a process of direct questioning as we went about our work, more formal interviews with participants and researcher observation, all of which were triangulated to provide a working, 'folk' definition of emotion and emotional behaviour in the context of policy-making.

Descriptions of emotion were always situated in actual behaviour; it was hard for informants to provide an abstract definition of emotion. It belongs more to a way of relating to experience: something you do as an embodied form of knowledge that is about 'knowing it rather than just reading it in a book'. In this way, emotion as a cipher for personal experience emerged as a category of knowledge, a way of both knowing the world and representing it and being in it. You have emotions, your own relationship to a personal, lived experience. But you also behave emotionally, in ways that demonstrate to others a reliving of that experience, as opposed to what might be called a calm recollection of it through description. Anything that showed that you were personally experiencing or reliving a phenomenon in another's presence was labelled 'emotional'.

The idea that everyone involved in the forums has emotional knowledge, whether they act on it or not, was rarely disputed by informants. However it is also frequently described by informants as ambiguous, unreliable and potentially overwhelming knowledge – in contrast with 'rational' knowledge, which is the prerequisite for 'professionalism' in policy-making. *To my informants emotion is rationality's antithesis and yet the only thing that makes rationality usable and morally good.* So the realm of the emotional is essential, but difficult, territory for even the most bureaucratic of participants in the policy forums.

Emotions and the 'grassroots'

Perhaps because of the ambivalent status of emotion, largely unspoken but complex rules about how to express it and the duty to express it seem to have evolved among the forums' participants. In particular, it became apparent that emotionality (in the sense of displaying behaviour and language associated with the emotional) was considered to have a special relationship with the 'grassroots' or community activist participants. In the first instance, activists were presented to me during interviews as people who could 'get away with' displaying their emotional connection to the issues under discussion. Having the permission to bring the emotional to bear upon decision-making is seen as serving a deliberative function and, perhaps, a moral one as well. A sort of folk sentimentalism is very much in evidence when you ask informants what makes a good policy decision or document which involves having an emotional (first-person and experiential) relationship to a phenomenon or an issue you need to make a decision about. Participants of all backgrounds often speak about the forums' power residing in its ability to enable contact with people *experiencing* poverty – not studying, analysing or representing those in poverty – and that this was essential to uncovering 'reality'. In turn this allows decision

makers to make 'good' choices. The only people who are considered to be in a position to deliver this first-person testimony are community activists with direct experience. In this way, emotional knowledge emerged as the special and almost exclusive preserve of community activists. Not only are they the only ones who are allowed to display emotional knowledge or act upon it in the forums uninhibited, but they are the only ones who ever *could*, according to informants. So while emotionality excludes you from 'professional' status, it also gives you the right to be at the table and have your role in deliberations and is a powerful riposte to the perceived knowledge shortcomings of policy-making professionals. In short there is a peculiar, almost talismanic power held by the publicly emotional person in a process contrived to exclude subjectivity and individuality.

Feeling Rules and Roles

The way the forums' participants negotiate the expectations they think others have about their conduct and attitudes, literally the way they act, reflects a well-documented need for people to have defined roles they can play in social situations. This perhaps matters so much in the context of these forums, has become exaggerated even, because it furnishes a highly structured way of bringing one's personal passions to bear on something that is incredibly process-driven and abstract. These expectations are scripted by a complex set of 'feeling rules'. In the way that informants describe in detail what emotional behaviour they may or may not enact and under which circumstances, the rules and roles in the forum provide the group with a way of managing strong or disruptive feelings.

In the context of the forums I have been discussing, there were arguably very specific feeling rules – in particular around the close connection between emotional management, a lack of first-person perspective and the idea of 'professionalism'. However these are all feeling rules that relate to NGO workers and civil servants. These were groups of people

with elaborate sets of behaviours determining what kind of emotional knowledge was permissible and where, and also around the way you signalled that you were 'doing' the work of managing your emotionality in public. Analysing the emotion rules around community activists is complicated somewhat by the fact that this emotional role revolved around their perceived *lack* of rules and ungovernability.

Arguably such parameters still constitute rules about feeling for community activists, but not about needing to conform to a set of inner emotions that they may not be experiencing as in the case of emotional labour as generally defined. Rather community activists seem to be explicitly and implicitly encouraged to break the conventions of the policy world in unpredictable ways; they are there to experience and act upon their first-person relationship to something that really matters to them, to act upon their emotional knowledge. In the setting of these policy forums that is their primary feeling rule.

Splitting and projection

One of the most striking features of the way emotion gets dealt with in these forums is the way that many participants come to see this particular aspect of knowledge to be irreconcilable with, and at complete odds, to other forms of knowledge, for example scientific or legal expertise. Nevertheless all individuals acknowledge the need to be both thinking and feeling decision-makers, and so certain groups become the repositories for different types of knowledge. Looked at in this way community activists carry the emotional side of everyone involved.

By considering the emotional content of these forums, a picture emerges of policy-making itself as a social defence against anxiety. It is an institution in society charged with recognising the end of one state of affairs and the beginning of another, whose aim is to manage change in a society with all the difficult human responses that change can

generate. There is a recurring theme in these forums of the negotiation and policing of the boundary between 'personal' and 'professional' knowledge about social change. By splitting off the emotional contribution to the forum's work from professionals' roles and projecting it onto community activists, their 'grassroots' status and policy workers' 'professional' status are preserved.

Challenges for Research and Practice

Introducing emotion into the analysis of policy needs to be taken far more seriously as an aspect of political studies. It opens up new fields for exploring what is at stake and who is in a position of power and authority, which do not necessarily merely reproduce the potentials and inequalities of other more established forms of influence and knowledge.

In particular, emerging findings from this research pose the following questions for researchers and practitioners, which the final phase of this project and future work should investigate:

- Emotional recruitment, in which community representatives and activists are looked to to express what 'professionals' may not, presents several problems of power and status within the context of policy-making forums. If a 'professional' may not behave in certain ways because it will be regarded as socially incompetent by their peers, what are the ethics of encouraging or recruiting people who will contravene these feeling rules, perhaps effectively carrying out the 'professionals' emotional dirty work?
- What weight should practitioners attach to the types of status being presented as 'grassroots' opens up or closes off? The emotional and social wellbeing of those who are recruited into participating in policy is surely a concern of the policy-making community as much as questions of access and information, and concepts of empowerment should also include having the opportunity to make choices about the emotional content of the way you present yourself.
- The tendency for citizens to be referred to as 'customers' in many participatory governance projects implies an obligation on State employees to labour emotionally for the citizen/client/consumer. This can manifest itself as activists trying to exact emotional retribution from State institutions through personal confrontations. Informants from the Civil Service in particular report that there is currently little opportunity to discuss these often upsetting experiences and that they have few legitimate strategies for addressing them. How can we better support policy workers emotionally who engage with the 'grassroots'?

Cultural practice in the Civil Service around 'emotion', as understood by this research, is an important part of processes and institutions that make public policy. Further ethnographic research, rooted in Civil Service work, looking at understandings and practices of emotion would be an essential next step in developing practical interventions to address the issues raised here.



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