

Crossing the quadrant: policy research and public sociology

Jan Law

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Introduction

This chapter explores the relationship between policy research and public sociology. Policy sociology involves social research that aims to contribute to the public policy process. It typically does this by attracting research funding either directly from policy-making bodies or from third parties such as research councils, charitable foundations or other bodies. In this policy sociology seeks to generate constructive relationships with government and policy insiders. On the one hand, policy sociology often reduces sociology to a form of technical expertise shaped more by the conditions of funding than the logic of scientific enquiry (Bryson, 1999). Such instrumentalism risks reducing policy sociology to a subordinate relationship to funders in the form of ‘sponsor capture’. On the other hand, a growing literature suggests that the subjective experience of researchers within the processes of policy sociology is often neglected and marginalised by standard accounts of the research process (Allen Collinson, 2004; Bryson, 1999; Hey, 2001; Tilbury, 2007).

My own experience as researcher in the field of policy sociology in different capacities, as research assistant, research fellow, co-investigator and consultant, will help shed some light on the tensions between public interest and policy research. The types of policy research I conducted range across social attitudes studies, child protection, school and higher education, and social aspects of health, including disability, homelessness, young people, sexual health, and smoking. While much of my experience as a policy researcher, particularly time spent in the field, has given me enormous satisfaction, it has also been one of job insecurity, intense emotional labour, and inequality of opportunity. In this my experience closely parallels those reported by sociologists engaged in policy research (Allen Collinson, 2004; Bryson, 1999; Goode, 2006; Hey, 2001; Reay, 2000; Tilbury, 2007) and tallies with wider studies on the careers of contract researchers (Simmons and Walker, 2000; UCU, 2008a, 2008b).

At one extreme, I carried out interviews for a national survey organisation. Here the work was highly impersonal, bureaucratically organised with tight controls imposed over fieldwork data collection. My job involved little in the way of personal autonomy and the work itself felt remote, isolating and automatic. Even my safety in the field was no one's affair but mine alone. More usually, contract research involves a deeper intellectual and emotional commitment. For instance, I was engaged as a part-time, hourly paid contract research assistant to evaluate sex education training in primary schools. Interviews were conducted with teachers in rural and urban primary schools with the aim of evaluating the extent to which training had enabled teachers to acquire the necessary confidence and skills to become effective sexual health promoters in the classroom. The policy-level concern was that variations in classroom delivery of the programme might lead to uneven and ineffectual sex education. The richness of data that I elicited through fieldwork interviews on this highly sensitive issue made a significant contribution to national-policy understanding of aspects of sex education that was otherwise shrouded in popular misconceptions.

Such experiences inform my discussion in this chapter of policy sociology and its relationship to public sociology. This has been put into sharp relief by the debate over Michael Burawoy's appeal for engaged, public sociology. In concentrating on public sociology, Burawoy's critics have largely passed over his claims about policy sociology and its relationship to other types of sociology. Policy sociology is often assumed as typically taking a pathological form, corrupted by client capture. While the number of policy researchers has mushroomed in recent decades their experience has largely been ignored in standard accounts of the research process. I recount my experience of research dynamics as a contribution to a reflexive understanding of the tension between policy sociology and public sociology.

Policy sociology

Sociology, as Burawoy famously argued, has a responsibility to turn the reflexive knowledge that it produces over to the service of social and political 'progress'. In this it shares an older pedigree with the 'social problems' tradition of sociology. From its earliest nineteenth-century incarnations European sociology attempted to analyse how society functioned but

played only a limited role in helping to bring about policy reforms and social change (Coleman, 1979). In Britain, sociology developed in a close relationship to policy elites, typically as gifted amateurs concerned to ameliorate appalling social conditions as problems of urbanism, industrialisation, poverty, ethnicity, deviance, labour, and conflict (Abrams, 1969). More empirical forms of sociology committed to social reform like the British social survey tradition of Charles Booth had only a limited idea of how to influence the policy process (Bulmer, 1985). The main approach of the social problems tradition was to stimulate moral outrage through a factual 'expose' of evil social conditions. Poverty or slum housing only had to be brought to the public's attention by means of irrefutable, detailed empirical evidence for an appropriate public policy remedy to be made in response to the moral outrage.

While these studies raised the profile of the social problems agenda in the public consciousness their effectiveness in influencing public policy was limited. As sociology became professionalized, systematic and specialised from the 1930s onwards it adopted a more detached scientific self-image. As such it was concerned to limit accusations of political or moral bias. Earlier sociological preoccupations with social problems became institutionalised and formalised. Policy sociology aimed to ameliorate social problems in partnership with the requirements of public policy (Dahrendorf, 1995). From its base in the Fabian-influenced London School of Economics, British sociology was strongly associated with social administration, social work and public service (Dahrendorf, 1995). With its close alignment to the Labour Party and commitment to social reform, post-war sociology expanded outwards from the LSE into the provinces.

A strong public service ethos enabled professional sociology to function as academic, sometimes critical advisors to the establishment during the post-war welfare consensus. The growth of state-run public services generated a demand for the academic analysis social and public policy, centred initially on health, social work and urban deprivation. Action research evaluated policy as it was framed within the established welfare consensus. Politicians and policy-makers offered up their plans to the techniques of experimental social science in the tacit understanding that if its effectiveness was not supported by valid research techniques then the plan would be reviewed, revised or changed. Such a model continued to assume that

there was a political consensus about social outcomes. As Halsey (2004: 106) notes, the language of ‘social problems’ could disguise underlying conflicts between sociology and public policy: ‘The historic role of the social scientist as critic of the social order must set limits to his or her incorporation into administration just as the maintenance of political democracy must set limits to his or her participation in the making of decisions’.

Over the past thirty years the relationship between sociology and government policy in the UK has often been an antagonistic one. The Conservative governments of the 1980s and early 1990s marginalised professional sociology from the policy process. Professional sociology also remained on the periphery of New Labour policy-making after 1997. Under Thatcherism, mainstream sociology was subject to vitriolic political attack because it maintained an independent concern for the structural basis of social problems and a critical orientation on unequal relations of power (Halsey, 2004). Neoliberalism’s agenda of ‘rolling back the state’ and ‘rolling out the market’ as the best possible solution for an individual and her family to flourish meant that policy elites had little use for critical, independent professional sociology, including policy sociology.

Policy sociology and public sociology

In Burawoy’s ideal-type policy sociology provides solutions to pre-defined problems. External clients specify the task of the sociologist within a narrowly defined contractual relationship, while other clients are closer to arms-length patrons of broadly defined policy agendas (Burawoy, 2007a: 31). Policy sociology therefore is often far removed from the ideal of sociology as an autonomous, intellectually critical endeavour (see Table 1). Not all policy sociology is of this type however. Although in Burawoy’s ideal-type policy sociology and public sociology are directly counterposed as distinctive research practices, they are not necessarily mutually hostile to each other. Burawoy (2007a: 33) described the inner relationship of the sociological quadrant thus: ‘Critical sociology is the conscience of professional sociology, just as public sociology is the conscience of policy sociology’. Policy sociology may become public sociology when research recommendations are ignored or rejected by policy elites and policy sociologists feel compelled to put their findings before a wider public. Sociologists constantly traverse the quadrants. Burawoy (2007a: 38-40) gives

examples of leading sociologists like WEB du Bois who attempted to change policy through public sociology, with an interlude as a professional sociologist, while Robert Park became a professional sociologist after working as a campaigning journalist. C. Wright Mills constantly moved between professional sociology, public sociology and critical sociology.

Policy sociology is often been associated with what Morris Janowitz (1972) called an 'engineering model' of instrumental knowledge. Research is defined by a form of technical expertise that policy sociologists can draw upon rationally from their 'tool-kit' to deal with the job in hand. The engineering model is often contrasted to an 'enlightenment model' of knowledge, which develops the basic science of abstract theoretical models separate from any direct concern with practical issues. Rejecting the intoxication of theoretical speculation or ideological partisanship, the sober collection of data and measured calculations about alternative courses of action underlie the engineering ideal in policy sociology.

Nonetheless, the idea that the application of a scientific methodology will produce cast iron results to improve society through policy manipulation has not only failed to deliver lasting or cumulative gains in terms of either social reform or scientific knowledge but is based on unchallenged value assumptions about the hierarchy of power that more critical forms of sociology would contest at root. It also presents an unrealistic picture of the research process itself, which is much more messy, confused, uncertain, and contingent than the smooth appeal to technical expertise would suggest. In the interest of maintaining an engineering façade, policy sociologists are careful to conceal problems in the research process in case it calls into question technical competence and usefulness.

Perhaps the most trenchant critique of Burawoy's treatment of policy sociology has been that of David Brady (2004). Brady is concerned that Burawoy is turning attention away from the state and relations of power at a time when the anti-state ideology of neoliberalism makes engagement with the state an imperative for sociology as a discipline. Brady (2004: 1634) argues that Burawoy constructs a false dichotomy between public and policy sociology and 'arbitrarily places success stories under the label of "public" sociology when they could just as easily be labeled "policy" sociology (research on displaced workers, toxic waste, housing inequalities, and educational reform, to advocacy for public health campaigns around HIV-AIDS or needle exchange to training community organizers to deal with the media)'. To see all state-funded research as requiring a servile relationship, Brady argues, promotes an unreal

caricature: ‘sociologists have something very different and valuable to contribute to policy. For example, status attainment stratification sociologists have provided convincing evidence that much of one’s socioeconomic status is inherited’. However, Brady, in turn, borders on a caricature of Burawoy, who does in fact note the value of policy sociology when it is tempered by dialogue with other forms of sociology.

Others like Douglas Massey (2007) came to the defence of policy sociology while being sharply critical of the politics of public sociology. While Massey is personally committed to social justice and has been a politically-active sociologist on a range of contentious public issues, he rejects political partisanship within professional and policy sociology. He advances a number of familiar reasons. First, ‘effective policy requires an accurate understanding of the social structures, group processes, and individual behaviours that one seeks to modify through political action’ (Massey, 2007: 146). Second, sociology depends on its reputation for impartiality and objectivity, and to stick to statements of scientific fact; anything less lacks scientific legitimacy. Third, by constantly improving the standards of social investigation, sociology acquires scientific prestige and respect, which only established leaders in the profession can appeal to in their public pronouncements.

For defenders of policy sociology like Massey, its chief legitimation is that only by becoming a trusted insider within the networks of policy elites can sociology have a real influence, rather than being ignored as irrelevant to real world issues. Without this kind of insider policy engagement sociology will prove irrelevant, prone to ‘abstract’ theory and ‘structural bias’ rather than interact with the concerns of elites. For Burawoy (2007b: 248), Massey’s ‘confident, almost euphoric’ belief in sociology’s technical virtues harks back to the technocratic politics in a ‘messianic defence’ of what he calls ‘second-wave sociology’ that was dominant in the US during the Cold War years. This moment has gone for good, Burawoy argues, undone by the public and critical sociology that emerged with 1960s radicalism.

Table 1: Burawoy’s ideal-type of policy sociology

<i>Criteria</i>	<i>Policy Sociology</i>
Knowledge	Instrumental
Truth	Pragmatic
Legitimacy	Effectiveness
Accountability	Clients
Politics	Policy intervention
Pathology	Servility

Source: Adapted from Burawoy, 2007a, p. 43.

Policy Sociology and Client Capture: A case study

Throughout the different phases of fieldwork I was extremely active with the time-consuming routines of the research process: negotiating access, liaising with funders, conducting interviews, writing-up field notes, attending meetings, and so on. As a by-product of all this activity, I retained a hoard of paperwork, personal notes and electronic communications, which I draw upon to inform the main drift of the narrative I recount in what follows. An important caveat is that this ‘data’ was not collected systematically or with a view to reconstruct the inner dynamics of research collaboration.

Dorothy Smith’s (1987) materialist approach to institutional ethnography has advanced the case for the necessity of reconstructing experiential accounts. This is especially significant for dealing with marginal structural positions where a documentary trail is unavailable or unlikely to reveal unequal power dynamics. Materialist feminists argue that such narratives provide meaningful reconstructions of the institutional worlds in which research gets embedded (Naples, 2003). It allows some access to local institutional practices within which policy sociology is enacted. Materialist feminism aims to produce knowledge that helps its producer understand her implicit as well as explicit position in specific institutional contexts.

This complicates the idea that social research involves taking up an innocent stance as a neutral observer of social action. Institutional ethnography adopts an ‘insider’s critique’ from points of view marginalised by the ruling relations that operate in local contexts (Smith, 1990).

Here I am encouraged by some of the ‘confessional’ narratives of contract research that are beginning to emerge in the literature (see Hey, 2001; Goode, 2006; Reay, 2000; Tilbury, 2007). However, there is a danger with the cultural fascination with the confessional. Some researchers confuse personal confession with reflexivity in the sense of an attempt to account for the structural position of the researcher in objective social space. Diane Reay (2000) described her own sense of marginalisation when, working as a contract researcher, she was stigmatised as ‘dim dross’. In response, she took up a standpoint as a working class woman to raise issues around social justice, the ethics of caring and the culture of uncaring which permeates academic, as well as wider social, elites. Similarly, Patricia Hill Collins (2007: 104) acknowledges that her own marginalised social position as an African American woman in overwhelmingly white and male settings informed her intellectual and political standpoint. She felt frustrated about carrying her working-class habitus into situations that ‘routinely privilege the cultural (and actual) capital of middle-class families’. Since she belongs to and identifies with groups that attract little prestige within American society, she stands in a different relationship to power relations than mainstream white, middle class sociology. This helped her to develop distinctive ideas about democracy, social justice, ethnicity, and feminism.

In reporting my own experiences within the policy sociology field, I take ethical account of the contested nature of knowledge, including knowledge of knowledge production. My experience of a government-funded evaluation of sexual health policy indicates how policy research can be shaped by client-driven agenda. The aim of the evaluation was to assess the progress of the aims of the policy action plan at national, regional and local level and make recommendations. My main role was to conduct semi-structured interviews and focus groups with key stakeholders in the national steering group, clinical services, education, prisons and religious and non-statutory sectors. This process was fraught with tensions between the client’s steering group and the academic research team. Repeated attempts were made by the

clients to shape both the research design and findings. We were subjected to informal pressure from policy insiders who expected the research team to comply. This experience broadly corroborates the findings of other research about how policy evaluation may ‘cherry pick’ from research data to suit predefined political objectives.

Previous experience meant that our research team were conscious that policy research can be used to legitimate pre-existing policy solutions. We accepted that our role was to service a client and envisaged the relationship as coming close to Massey’s (2007) idea of political partnership. Perhaps naively, we assumed that since the research involved policy evaluation that it would be linked to the public interest demands of accountability. It became clear early on that we were expected to play a subordinate role and attempted to avoid overt ‘sponsor capture’ and retain control over the research process.

At the initial meeting major changes were imposed on our methodology by the steering group. We made some attempt to resist these changes since we saw ourselves as providing research expertise, but ultimately felt pressured into accepting them. Drafts of the interview and questionnaire schedules were submitted to the steering group before our first meeting. The survey questionnaire was heavily criticised by the steering group because they wanted it to resemble to the interview schedule more closely. The steering group proposed that both research instruments should rigidly cover identical themes in order that both could be coded according to the same quantitative values and the different sources of data compared statistically. At that early stage the clients were concerned to give some form of numerical value to the qualitative as well as the quantitative research findings. They sought to do this by making the questionnaire conform more closely to the semi-structured interview schedule, which they also wanted to make amenable to quantitative measurements. We found this proposal unacceptable. It ran contrary to elementary methodological principles of inherently different research techniques. Reducing qualitative research to numerical values, we argued, would undermine the validity of the semi-structured interviews, which require a more flexible and responsive mode of investigation. Nonetheless, we reluctantly revised the research instruments.

Originally we specified fifty people for interview, a sufficiently robust number for a six month evaluation covering two geographical case studies. However, the steering committee wanted an additional case study, committing us to three case studies instead of the two we had tendered for. Members of the steering group also wanted to restrict the sample size for the survey to key stakeholder identified by them, which we argued would affect the reliability and representativeness of the data. The sample was determined in the first instance by the list of stakeholders supplied to the research team by the client, from where we would ‘snowball’ out to encompass wider circles of stakeholders.

Representatives of religious organisations were identified as key stakeholders by the steering group to be interviewed. However, access to some leading religious stakeholders in Scotland was limited. They would either decline to be interviewed or be unavailable for interview. I voiced my concerns with members of the committee about how key representative figures that sat on policy-making committees could refuse to engage with the policy evaluation process. I was discouraged from pursuing this line of enquiry any further but eventually managed to interview one representative of a faith group and one from an education department, another difficult area to access. I was told informally by a phone call from a member of the steering group that these two interviews were sufficiently representative of these key sectors. ‘Religion’ and ‘Education’ had thereby engaged fully with the evaluation process.

We did not concede to every demand. Like O’Brien and colleagues (2008) who battled with their clients to interview education professionals and not just managers, our study also depended on eliciting the views of frontline workers since they possess firsthand experience of how well new policies are working. A voluble member of the steering group instructed us that front line worker voices were irrelevant to the evaluation. On this occasion we challenged the assertion of authority on the basis that any credible policy evaluation must involve the people responsible at all levels for implementing the policy. Informally some members of the steering group indicated that they did not share such a disparaging view of front line staff. That they were not prepared to voice this openly suggests that policy makers may also be internally divided and have different understandings about the research process. Although the steering group may have seen this as a concession, we saw it as essential to the

integrity of the research design as well as a defence of the interests and voice of a group lower down the policy hierarchy (Piven, 2007). In the event, the voices of this group had a major impact on the critical aspects of the findings, which brought us into new conflicts with the steering group.

As the data emerged from the interviews, it became clear that the steering group were concerned about some of the more politically contentious findings. Evidence that the policy was far too narrowly focused on clinical considerations rather than cultural and social conditions of sexual health was not well received. This reflected the main interest of steering group membership, which consisted largely of professionals with clinical backgrounds. In interviews, members from non-clinical backgrounds told me that they felt outnumbered and intimidated by the atmosphere of medical elitism, something that appears common to other statutory health policy committees. In our interviews, frontline workers in the non-statutory sector said that they felt demoralised and under-appreciated by clinical/statutory sectors. Again, issues of clinical elitism were also raised by non-statutory sectors who felt that they were being blocked from developing any clinical strategies of their own.

It became clear from the interviews that most stakeholders thought that social and cultural factors were not being sufficiently addressed and that policy tended to be far too narrowly focussed around clinical and medical models of sexual health. In the rural case study strong ideological barriers were clearly operating to inhibit effective sexual health education. For example, at least one sexual health professional on a remote island community refused to admit that gay men even existed within their client population. In this case, sexual health services for homosexuals were literally non-existent, with many gay men having to go to the mainland for help and advice. Some GP's were also church elders and refused to provide women with contraception or to display certain public health posters in waiting rooms.

Some key figures in the steering group flatly refused to accept our findings. Informal pressure was applied to try to persuade us to re-analyse the findings and 'soften' some of the language. For both the draft report and the ministerial presentation, the contents were vetted by the steering committee. Some members of the steering group also suggested that the interview

data had been misinterpreted. They requested access to the original transcripts of the one hundred or so interviews that I had conducted in order to examine the data for themselves. The atmosphere at these meetings became quite tense as the committee attempted to ‘cherry pick’ from the findings and create a report that endorsed the effectiveness of policy. When this failed, an attempt was made to discredit the findings by finding fault in our methods, specifically that the survey sample of the quantitative strand of the research was too small and unrepresentative. The data was sent to a ‘swat team’, a government analytical services research department. Their analysis supported the committee’s complaint about the lack of statistical reliability of the questionnaire, the same limitation that had been imposed on the research design initially and that we had challenged unsuccessfully. By sending the report to analytical services, any findings that the policy group found objectionable could be invalidated as a technical question of scientific administration. We replied that the steering group itself had reduced the size of the population to be surveyed. When we requested the minutes for the meetings when the survey size had originally been discussed we were informed that no such discussion had been recorded in the minutes of any meeting.

Funders held the reins of power over the ‘product’ by controlling the distribution and consumption of the report. Although the findings were presented to the minister and the national committee (the same committee that many respondents criticised in the interviews), to my knowledge the report never went ‘live’ for public viewing nor was it circulated to research participants. A circular was sent round all health boards outlining key clinical indicators and recommendations. However, no mention was made of the report or the need to address social and cultural factors, our key finding. There was no contact or invitation by the authorities to present our findings to committees or conferences.

Conclusion

At all stages of the research process repeated attempts were made by the clients to shape the research and findings. Ultimately, the report itself seems to have fallen into a black hole and has not been widely distributed or made publicly available as far as can be discerned. This illustrates some of the implicit tensions of policy sociology. It can take the pathological forms identified by Burawoy and others of being required to legitimate policy under the pressures of

sponsor capture. While there are examples of creative policy interventions by policy sociology, shading into more critical and public forms of sociology, too often policy sociology is subject to ‘sponsor capture’.

Policy sociology views the public interest as its own speciality. This is advanced by working directly with government, which, it is assumed, represents the public interest. This perspective has been subject to sustained critique within sociology for over fifty years, not least for its unreal image of the policy process and the role of sponsor capture of sociological research. For others, policy sociology corrupts the ‘real’ sociology done by professionals and public advocacy. While it relies on professional sociology for legitimacy, policy sociology speaks to non-academic audiences. It generates instrumental knowledge about the best means of advancing a given policy outcome. In this it can often find itself in a defensive alliance with policy elites against those from critical sociology and public sociology who are contesting the very terms of the debate about the public interest.

Policy sociology legitimates itself by stressing the value of research technique, its effectiveness, and its pragmatic sense of realism. However, where policy sociology is controlled by contact with other types of sociology – professional, critical and public – Burawoy (2007a) argues that it may resist ‘sponsor capture’ and instrumentalisation of knowledge. Without regular contact with the creative pulse of public, professional and critical sociology, policy sociology can too easily degenerate into a narrow, pathological form of sponsor capture. Burawoy’s attempt to counter-balance the pathology of policy sociology with the engagement of public and critical sociology indicates that the tensions at the heart of the sociological enterprise are not easily resolvable.

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