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Extending the reach of policy and strategy research using Political Discourse Analysis; the case of the Health and Social Care Act 2012.

(Word Count 1903)

Abstract
There is a growing interest in discursive perspectives on strategy and policy as practice. The goal of this paper is to present a discussion of the research methodology used to analyse the underexplored relationships between discourse, strategy and practice in health policy development The research explores the development of the Health and Social Care Act (2012) and in doing so highlights the weakness' in communication – both in developing a narrative but also in being able to use it persuasively with important audiences – demonstrating a lack of engagement both with parliamentary colleagues, professionals and the electorate.

The conceptual framework of this research is based on the complex relationship between discourse, strategy and practice. Methodologically the research takes an ontological, qualitative, interpretative approach using political discourse analysis (PDA)(Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012) to explore and analyse the policy development. This will be achieved by conceptualising those discursive practices that provide strategies and arguments within the trajectory of the policy-as-discourse. Thus offering an opportunity to reach the parts of policy, strategy and practice that other theories and methods can't reach. Initially I will explore the dialogical relationship between theory and method in the context of strategic policy analysis and discourse (Yanow, 1999, Hill, 2013, Pollock 2005). Such an approach will help reveal how discourse and the neglected field of political argumentation can shape reality and influence strategies for action.

Initial analysis of the data contributes to the theoretical and practice knowledge regarding the implementation and development of health care policy. This research also adds to existing bodies of theory in political discourse analysis, strategic practice and policy implementation.

Policy context for NHS Reform and Strategy

The research explores the case of the Health and Social Care Act (2012) as the most controversial piece of NHS legislation in more than two decades. The journey through parliament could be described as a political thriller – from the legislation's origins through the development of the 2010 white paper "Liberating the NHS" and the resultant Act; an Act so controversial that it appeared at times as though the Government might lose control of it, all of this occurred over a period of two years. The principal focus is the relationship between the use of discourse in key parliamentary debates and the between the different policy dimensions of the stakeholders.

The NHS has experienced a period of intense reform and structural change under successive governments. In the first half of the NHS's 60year existence it underwent only one major reorganisation when the Conservative government introduced regional area health authorities' in 1974. In the following two decades stronger mangerialism

was introduced in 1982, and the then Conservative government heralded the introduction of the 'internal market'. The Labour party then separated this policy into bodies that 'bought' or 'commissioned' services on behalf of the public and those that provided them (Taylor 2013). The following 10 years under Labour brought over four re-structures thick and fast with the NHS in almost a permanent state of revolution causing managers of the NHS to call for a period of stability.

It was less than 60 days after the publication of the Coalition agreement where both Nick Clegg with David Cameron promised "no top down reorganization of the NHS" (Her Majestey's Government 2010), that the white paper 'Liberating the NHS' (DH 2010) was delivered, a mere 50 pages long. Missing entirely from the white paper's pages was any convincing narrative over why the reforms were needed. More particularly there was no explanation over how these reforms – done at this time and in this way, and with the disruption that the paper itself acknowledged was inevitable – would in fact contribute on any recognisable timescale to the £20bn of efficiency savings needed. This paper then traversed controversially through parliament as a Bill (Appendix 1) having had over 1000 amendments and a period of 'pause' applied resulting in the current NHS Health & Social Care Act (2012).

Methodology

The philosophical approach to this research, can be substantiated by the types of methods chosen (Haverland & Yanow 2012). This style can then be further defined as a phenomenological approach which sees social phenomena as socially constructed theory, concerned with generating meanings and gaining insights into those phenomena (Denzin & Lincoln 2000). The study proposed will explore these complex relationships through CDA to inform theory make recommendations by identifying ways forward through the process of value orientated reflective, abductive reasoning.

The methodological strategy for this research approach is draws a distinction between 'methods' and 'methodology', (Haverland & Yanow 2012) the methods designate the tools and techniques that are used to carry out research, which in this case was political discourse analysis (PDA) (Fairclough & Fairclough 2012). The latter refers to the applied philosophical position that underpins and informs the application of the tools and techniques which in this case can be described as an ontological approach as it concerns itself with exploring the nature of reality and perceptions of social phenomena and related responses from social actors in the relevant fields of social practice [stakeholders] (Saunders 2009). Grix (2002) claims the interrelationship between a researcher's ontological position and chosen methodology is crucial to the research process. The research takes an holistic, interpretive, qualitative within-case study approach to studying discourse (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2002). The goal of interpretive research is to provide reasons for a phenomenon. The research philosophy adopted captures the values in the research paradigm and the research data will be produced through abductive techniques as the research is seeking to understand social phenomena through investigation and interpretation which is contextualised (Grey 2009). It is suggested by Gold et al (2011) that any attempt to explain phenomena in context, which contributes to theory building and discovery learning through analysis, can be referred to as abductive research strategy (Gold et al 2011). Blaikie (2009) asserts that an adbuctive research strategy focuses on 'meanings and interpretations, motives and intentions, that people use to direct behaviour's he too refers to abductive

layers that permit iterations between theory and practice to resolve sense making (Blaikie, 2009).

The research objectives were shaped by the investigators ontological position. This research study is not positivist, it does not begin with a hypothesis or specify variables, and rather, it points toward the search for an understanding of meaning as a central characteristic of interpretive research. This philosophical approach makes concerted efforts to avoid a rush to diagnosis and analytical closure in order to allow an understanding of the key concepts, arguments and meanings-in-use among situational actors to emerge from the research (Geertz 1973). Thereby offering the researcher and the audience an opportunity to view the conceptual world of strategic practice and policy development using discourse analysis.

As an interpretive researcher, the research design has been structured to avoid premature diagnostic closure, thereby maximizing ability to identify a wide range of interpretations that are relevant to the research setting or situation. Concepts are abstractions; they cannot be observed directly in the "real world." These concepts of argumentation are defined in ways that render them as observable phenomena, with a definition representing each concept in the real world. These definitions come from the theoretical discourse to which the research question is linked. Interpretive research does not work with predefined concepts and theories, and so it has nothing to operationalise in a formal sense in advance of empirical observation. However, concepts and theories will become the outcome of a research process. These give voice to understandings of the social world as constructed by situational participants focusing on " theories" used by situational participants and concepts as they define them—that is, the meanings they attach to them, rather than the researcher's foreordained definitions (Schaffer 2006).

Methods

The interpretive method of case study approach provides a unit of analysis (Jarzabkowski 2005) for a highly systematic process to execute the research (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow 2012) and apply PDA (Fairclough &Fairclough 2012) argumentation frameworks for discourse in shaping policy reform (Appendix 2).

The use of Nvivo10 the qualitative data management tool was applied to help organise the data into the framed argumentation areas in parliamentary debates that shaped the Act. The data was drawn from the key parliamentary debates focused on the trajectory of the Health & Social Care Act (2012). The researcher then applied the Political Discourse Analysis (PDA) framework (Fairclough & Fairclough 2012) to the parliamentary debates recorded by Hansard (UK Government). Analysis of the debates using PDA analysed the relationships of discourse and strategic practice that underpins the policy reform (eg Appendix 3).

The style of argumentation in discourse used in parliamentary debates serves clear functions to underpin decisions and actions in the development of social policy (Fairclough 2010). Consideration is given to the creative ways that language policy agents use argumentation to identify strategy and practice and put policy into action in conditions of uncertainty and disagreement (Fairclough & Fairclough 2012). These claims rest on the trustworthiness of interpretations, and this rests on the integrity

systematic nature of data generation which was carried out (Moses and Knutsen 2007; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2009, 2012; Yanow 2009).

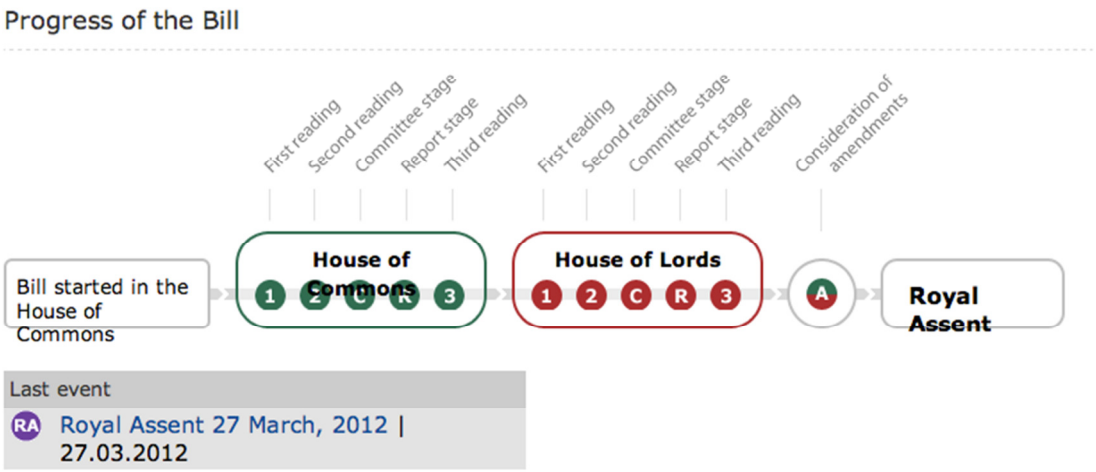
Peter Hall (1993) has drawn attention to policy frameworks and goals whist Campbell (1998) asserts that as policy-makers look out for valid justifications for policy change they engage in bricolage by framing solutions to policy problems in ways that enhance the legitimacy of their undertaking. Blyth (2002) underlines how economic ideas can become ideological weapons in the hands of policy-makers intent to challenge the given institutional balance and reshape policy outcomes. Goals are an intrinsic part of the parliamentary discourse process, defined as 'whatever policy actors say to one another and to the public more generally in their efforts to construct and legitimate their policy programs' (Schmidt 2002, p. 169; Fairclough & Fairclough 2012).

Conclusion

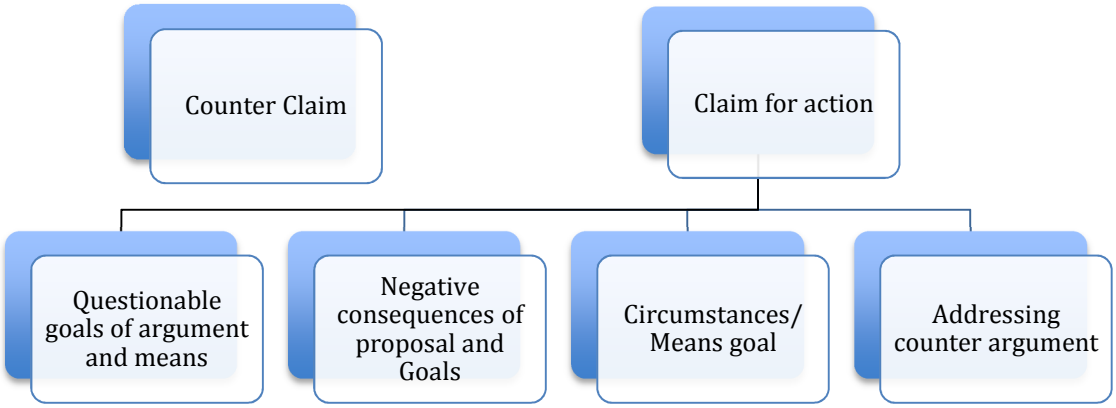
The process of deliberation through its capacity for learning, leads to creative thinking and new horizons. With the critical questioning of arguments and the learning that can arise from this process is thus the means by which the horizon-constituting, world-disclosing, potential of language can be opened up (Fairclough & Fairclough 2012). The particular model of deliberation and practical argumentation differs from others to include circumstantial premise and includes critical questioning of how the existing state of affairs and the context of action, is represented. One element in representations of circumstances is explanations, explanations of how the crisis came about in the case of the material analysed.

PDA can contribute to the concern of explanatory critique to show how particular strategies and associated imaginaries tend to prevail over others in political responses (Fairclough & Fairclough 2012). Through analysis of public deliberation particular reasons for action is explored through the identified case, providing support for particular actions, and suggesting why they are capable of withstanding warranted critical challenges, in part because of ways in which the critical potential of deliberation is limited. In so doing it can provide models for transcending these limitations, which may under favourable conditions help make deliberation more searching and more effective in challenging successful, but flawed strategies (and revealing their manipulative and ideological aspects of strategy and practice), help facilitate learning through critical questioning. This process will open up the horizon-constituting potential of deliberation of strategy, practice and policy reform, producing alternative imaginaries and strategies, which may under certain conditions contribute to producing policy reform in social reality which is more just, equitable, fair and secure than those which currently prevail.

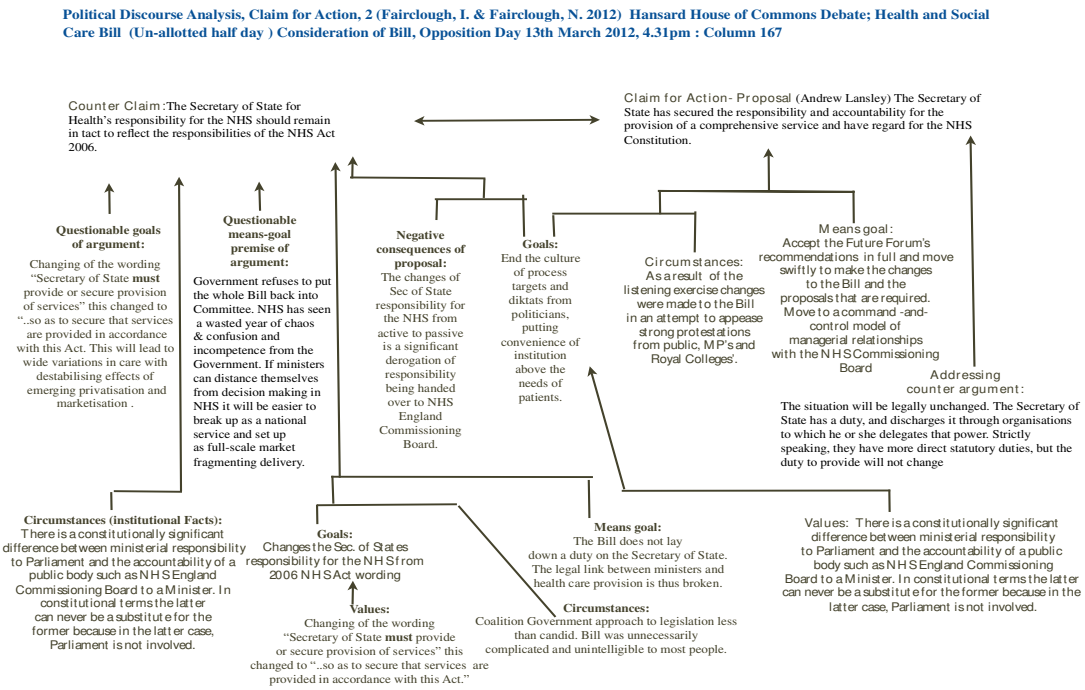
Appendix 1


Progress of the Bill
First reading
Second reading
Committee stage
Report stage
Third reading
First reading
Second reading
Committee stage
Report stage
Third reading
Consideration of amendments
Bill started in the House of Commons
House of Commons
1 2 C R 3
House of Lords
1 2 C R 3
A
Royal Assent
Last event
RA
Royal Assent 27 March, 2012 | 27.03.2012

Appendix 2: (PDA)
Framework to Analyse Political Promises as Reasons for Action (Fairclough & Fairclough 2012)



Appendix 3



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