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Eleveld, A.

Critical policy analysis, 6(3), 282-303

Published version: no link available

Link VU-DARE: <http://hdl.handle.net/1871/53285>

(Article begins on next page)

Anja Eleveld

Anja.eleveld@law.leidenuniv.nl

The Version of Record of this manuscript has been published and is available in *Critical Policy Studies* 2012 6 (3) , <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/19460171.2012.717783#.VNCbz9JgWUk>

The role of rhetoric and affect in policy changes. The case of Dutch Life Course Policy

Abstract.

Using methods that are developed in Discourse Historical Analysis this case-study on Dutch life course policy, suggests that analysis of (the interrelationship between) rhetoric and affect can contribute to a poststructuralist explanation of policy change. It is argued that the catachretic act of naming this policy 'life course policy' produced new spaces of representation within which (partly) incompatible goals and values were united. Actors identified with these new signifiers because they contained a promise, a way out of the old, dead-end discursive positions. Thus, the use of rhetoric constituted the dominant social security discourse in a new way, containing both the former dominant discourse and the voices of resistance, as a result of which the emphasis in the Dutch social security discourse shifted, albeit temporarily, from a policy informed by the values of the market to a work-life balance policy.

1. Introduction

Just after the turn of this century, the issue of a ‘life course based social security system’ arose on the Dutch policy agenda. The idea that the social security system was to be reformed into a ‘life course based’ system was shared by diverse groups, such as supporters of family policy; labor unions; employer unions; social-democrats, Christian and liberal political parties and feminists. They endorsed a common storyline that sounded like this:

“Different trends in modern society have caused major transformations in individual life courses. The social security institutions are not able to meet the demands of ‘modern society, such as the increased labor market participation of women, individualization, ageing and globalization. The problems accumulate in particular during those stages of life in which workers have to combine different activities such as work, care, education and leisure. In addition, people desire more balance and say in the way they distribute their time between these activities. This mismatch between, trends, desires and the social security system can only be solved in case social policy is reconciled with modern life courses.”

The new ‘life course based social security system’ should thus anticipate the new ways individuals prefer to distribute their time between work and other activities like care, education, leisure, etc. As such, the Dutch social security discourse of the time that emphasized the values of the market was transformed into a discourse that foregrounded a work-life balance. How can this policy change be explained?

For scholars engaged in post-positivistic policy analysis, policy change can to a great extent be ascribed to the construction of narratives and storylines. Hajer (1995), for example, argues that a storyline can both simplify the various aspects of a complex problem and facilitate different groups to read their own narrative in this storyline. As a

result, a storyline not only suggests unity in complex situations, it is also able to create unity among different groups. In addition, according to scholars engaged in ideational analysis, existing policies may alter because of the availability of new ideas (Cox 2001, Hay 2002, Blyth 2002, Schmidt 2002). This paper aims to add to these interpretative approaches to policy change arguing that change also occurs in the process of (rhetorical) argumentation, which can also be characterized by unconscious identification processes. Drawing on a (poststructuralist) discourse theoretical understanding of rhetoric, it is suggested that the introduction of new words into social security discourse, such as ‘life course’ and ‘life course perspective’, functioned as rhetorical tropes that gave shape to a new discourse and as such generated policy change.

In poststructuralist discourse theory the use of rhetoric in the policy making process is intrinsically related to social phenomena (i.e. the emergence of new social policy). As Griggs and Howarth argue, poststructuralist discourse theorists do not separate between “a concept and a metaphor, between a realm of rhetorical meaning and an underlying material reality, or indeed between the figurative and the proper/literal” (2006, p. 29). Instead they view rhetoric as an essential dimension of all social relations. The theoretical and empirical analysis of rhetoric is therefore essential for understanding and explaining social phenomena. Poststructuralist discourse theorists differ in this respect from other scholars whose research is also based on a ‘post-positivist paradigm of explanation’ (Glynos and Howarth 2007, p.18).¹ For example, as Finlayson has pointed out, Bevir and Rhodes, wrongly understand the formation of beliefs and the argumentation about them as two distinct actions. According to him, in poststructuralist rhetorical analysis, the formation of consensus or a unified constituency does not involve

the ‘discovery’ of a shared interest or opinion, as is proposed in interpretative studies, but its creation in argumentation. In general, then, from a poststructuralist perspective, rhetoric does not merely serve instrumental goals, but constitutes new beliefs in a struggle between contingent beliefs (Finlayson 2004, 2007, Griggs and Howarth 2006, Norval 2007, Laclau 2004, 2005).

The aim of this study is twofold. In the first place the study seeks to extend our understanding of processes of policy change, which in this case study involves the explanation of the emergence of life course policy in the Netherlands. A second aim of the study concerns a further development of discourse theoretical concepts for empirical analysis. This is important, because discourse theory tends to draw on highly abstract concepts that are difficult to operationalize for the purpose of empirical research. The case study thus illustrates how discourse theoretical concepts can be translated into less abstract methodological tools and how they can contribute to an explanation of policy change.

This paper is structured in the following way. Section Two further explains how, according to poststructuralist discourse theorists, the analysis of rhetoric contributes to the explanation of policy change. Section Three addresses the data and methods used in this study. Section Four shows how the emergence of a ‘life course perspective’ can be situated in the history of Dutch social security discourse. Whereas Section Five studies the ‘genealogical origins’ of the ‘life course perspective’ in the social security discourse, Section Six describes how the signifiers ‘life course’ and ‘life course perspective’ are dispersed in social security discourse. This section further examines why some key actors identified with these new signifiers. On the basis of the results of a textual analysis

that is presented in Section Seven, the relationship between the introduction of the new signifiers and the shift in Dutch social security discourse is further investigated. Finally, Sections Eight and Nine comprise the conclusions and some recommendations for future rhetorical analysis that is rooted in discourse theory.

2. Discourse theory and the use of rhetoric

This specific discourse theoretical approach of rhetoric is related to its ontological presumptions. Discourse theory as it has been developed by Laclau and Mouffe (1985) follows the Heideggerian distinction between the ‘ontical’ and the ‘ontological’. Whereas the ‘ontical’ refers to a particular domain or phenomenon, the ‘ontological’ entails “the categorical pre-conditions for such objects and their investigation”(Glynos and Howarth 2007, p.108). For Laclau, rhetoric is “tropology which outlines ontological logics of politics, that structure the social” (Pallonen 2006, p. 114). As such, rhetoric functions as an ontological conceptual category; it constitutes the ‘ontical’. Rhetoric is thus also constitutive of ‘discourse’, which, according to Laclau and Mouffe, can be defined as ‘a structured totality’ that results from an ‘articulatory practice’ or the practice in which a relationship is established ‘among elements such that their identity is modified’ (1985, p.105).

Whilst for poststructuralist discourse theorists rhetoric constitutes discourse, rhetoric can also change discourse: it reveals “how changes occur and politics move between unity and fragmentation” (Pallonen 2006, p.114). With respect to the transformative potential of rhetoric, Laclau introduces the rhetorical category of *catachresis*, which he describes as “the use of a figural term when there is no literal term

that can replace it (e.g. when we speak of a leg of a chair)” (2004, p.306). Since Laclau views discourse as a system of differences, unity can only emerge by assuming the representation of an impossible totality. According to him, the name of this impossible totality must be a catachretic name, because there is no other representation that can replace it; this name constitutes a new chain of equivalences between distinct elements. Drawing on Žižek’s argument that it is the name of the signifier that supports the identity of the subject, he concludes that it is ultimately the (catachretic) name of the object that brings about political unity (Žižek 1998, p. 94-95 cited by Laclau 2005, p.102-103). The catachretic ‘act of naming’ may generate social change as catachresis involves ‘figurative’ or ‘imaginative’ reasoning that is essential for the production of ‘new spaces of representation’, sustaining new discourses and new coalitions (1990:65, 2004:307, see also Griggs and Howarth 2006, and Pallonen 2006).

Laclau further argues that the act of naming is intrinsically connected with affect, because “affect is required if signification is going to be possible at all” (2005, p.116). Drawing upon Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, he holds that ‘the name’ becomes the ‘rallying point of passionate attachments’ as the split subject constantly seeks new fullness (2005, p.116). Glynos and Howarth (2007) have in this respect put forward that this search for fullness a critical dimension of poststructuralist analysis, as it tends to cover up other possibilities. According to them, a critical analysis of policy change should study how policy change has been furthered by fantasmatic elements that lead us to foreclose alternatives.

Norval (2007) shows, in a slightly different way, how rhetoric can generate change. According to her, rhetoric can make people see things in a different way: “If a grammar

gives us the ability to word the world, a new grammar opens up fresh worlds in which different objects and projects may appear and old ones may be ruled out” (2007, p.129). To illustrate this point, she refers to Wittgenstein’s example of the rabbit/duck picture. The moment in which a subject suddenly discovers a picture of a rabbit, which she earlier regarded as a picture of a duck, is what she calls ‘aspect dawning’; unexpectedly, the subject has discovered a new aspect. This is a moment of surprise: now it is a rabbit! At the same time the subject notices that the picture has not changed. In other words: in the new perspective, continuity and discontinuity occur. This is what Norval calls ‘aspect change’: seeing the duck now differs from the moment before the rabbit was discovered. According to Norval, both moments - aspect dawning and aspect change - are important for change. Translated to policy change, this means that policy change is conditioned upon a first moment of surprise in which the same things are *seen* in a different way, and the rediscovery of this initial moment of surprise.

A question which is, above all, relevant to policy analysis is how this poststructuralist approach to discourse and rhetoric is related to narrative analysis. After all, policy narratives are important ‘research objects’ in policy analysis that is based upon a ‘post-positivist paradigm of explanation’, such as (interpretative) post-positivistic policy analysis (Fischer 2003). In poststructuralist discourse theory the concept of ‘narrative’, to a great extent, converges with the aforementioned definition of ‘discourse’. That is, the ‘narrative’ refers to a certain type of articulatory practices, namely one which produces a specific kind of order between the elements: an order which persuades people to draw certain conclusions. Otherwise put, (policy) narratives can make people see things in a different way. If they do so, narratives operate as rhetorical tropes that change our

understanding of the world. Thus, from the perspective of poststructuralist discourse theory, a (policy) narrative can contribute to policy change through its operation as a rhetorical trope. The analysis of policy narratives is therefore also relevant to a discourse theoretical analysis of policy change.

It can be concluded that for both Norval and Laclau, rhetoric should not only be perceived as 'strategic manipulative acts', but also as constitutive of new discourses. In addition, they relate the deployment of rhetoric to affect. While Norval points to the 'moment of surprise' inherent in aspect dawning, Laclau argues that the identification with new signifiers is related to subconscious desires for fullness. The works of Laclau and Norval thus address some interesting issues that can be used for a post-structuralist analysis of policy change. Applying their theoretical concepts to our case study, the following research question can be formulated:

What was the role of the new signifiers, 'life course' and 'life course perspective' in the process of policy change?

This research question implies several other questions, such as:

- Which signifiers constituted the new discourse?
- How and/or why did actors identify with the new signifiers?
- How can the introduction of these signifiers be situated in the continuity and discontinuity of the ongoing discourse?

Before the main research question is addressed, the next section first illuminates the data and methods.

3. Data and methods

This paper is written as a part of a larger research project that studies the emergence of savings facilities in Dutch social security law. For this project almost 40 key actors were interviewed. The interviewees involved the minister of employment and social affairs and the minister of finance, representatives of the major political parties, advisors of the government and political parties, representatives of the main labor unions and the main employer union, representatives of other relevant interest groups (private insurance companies and organizations, the family council) and several officials working at the departments and in other advisory councils, such as the Temporary Expert Commission Emancipation (TECENA). For the purpose of the present research the data from nine interviews particularly relevant. These involved mostly interviews with advisors or prominent members of the Christian democratic party (CDA) and interviews with officials working in the field of emancipation policy. The respondents were asked how they interpreted ‘the life course perspective’ and what meaning they assigned to this signifier in public discourse.

In addition, the three most influential documents referring to the ‘life course perspective’ were selected for a textual analysis. These texts were all published in 2001 and 2002 and originated from: 1) the CDA, 2) the SER (Social and Economic Council that advises the government, and 3) the government.² Consequently, the interview data from the entire project served as guidance for the selection of a number of key texts for

further analysis. That is, eight other texts were selected which originated from five different key actors whom the interviewees referred to as being ‘the main figure(s) with respect to the emergence and dispersion of ‘life course policy’ discourse.’³

The next methodological step was to determine how to analyze these documents. Whereas poststructuralist discourse theory has not yet developed concrete research methods of its own, I looked at other possible research methods in the field of discourse analysis and decided to use some tools that are developed within Discourse Historical Analysis (DHA) developed by Wodak and others (Wodak *et al.* 1999, Reisigl and Wodak 2009).⁴ DHA entails a detailed study of texts. Each claim that is made in these text needs to be studied and categorized. For this kind of text analysis DHA formulates a number of heuristic questions. Of these, the following three are of interest to this study:

1. How are people, objects, phenomena/events, processes and actions named and referred to linguistically (strategies of nomination)?
2. What characteristics, qualities and features are attributed to social actors, objects, phenomena/events and processes (strategies of predication)?
3. What arguments are employed in the discourse in question (Reisigl and Wodak, 2009, p. 93)?

Wodak et al. (1999) used the third heuristic question to analyze the construction of national identities. As such, they distinguished between strategies of justification, strategies of construction, transformative strategies and strategies of dismantling. This study adapted these analytical categories to the structure of the analyzed texts.

4. Dominant discourses and counter-discourses on Dutch social policy

To situate the emergence of the discourse on life course policy within social security discourse, a limited historical analysis should start with the influential Van Rhijn report from 1945, which can be considered the first design of the current Dutch welfare state. This report argues in favour of a reformed system of social security that ensures a decent life for the entire population (Van Rhijn Commission, 1945, p.7). In the years that follow, a collective system is built up that aspires to cover all possible collective risks. This collective responsibility for individual welfare fits in well with the paternalistic welfare state discourse that is popular at the time: social security should take care of the citizens ‘from cradle to grave’. Notwithstanding constant struggles over its basic principles during the first decades after 1955, this ‘cradle to grave principle’ is hardly ever challenged (Noordam, 1998 and 2007).

In the mid-1970s, with the social security system ‘completed’, the Netherlands are struck by the (world) economic crisis, which results in a crisis of the social security system. In response to this crisis, social security discourse increasingly emphasizes individual risk responsibilities. This new discourse fits in well with the new individualization discourse, according to which the governmental interference in private affairs must be reduced. Another shift in the discourse concerns the framing of the crisis. Instead of attributing the crisis of the welfare state to external economic factors, the debate is increasingly determined by arguments referring to the widespread improper use of social benefits and the unmanageable costs of the welfare state. In the years that follow the system is further reduced and responsibilities shift from the collective to

individual citizens. In addition, because of European demands regarding equal treatment of men and women, so-called bread winner facilities are abolished in favour of more individualized facilities that endorse equal treatment of men and women (Asscher-Vonk 2001, Jaspers 2001, Noordam 1996 and 2007, Van der Veen 2001).

The report by the Buurmeijer Commission (1993) marks a new shift in the social security discourse. It reveals how the organization of unemployment and disability schemes has not led to the reintegration of unemployed and disabled workers into paid employment but has, in fact, encouraged welfare dependency. The report advocates the introduction of market processes in the social security system. Correspondingly, within the discourse, social security is increasingly approached in terms of economic incentives and disincentives and less in terms of rights and obligations. This implicates that citizens are no longer perceived as passive consumers of governmental policies, but as active, calculating subjects who carefully weigh what strategy promises most profits (Noordam 1996, 2007, Van Gestel, *et al.* 2009, Trommel and Van der Veen 1999). As such, in the 1990s the Dutch social security system moves steadily from the category of ‘corporatist welfare state’ towards the category of ‘liberal welfare state’ (Esping-Andersen 1990).

Initially, the changed discourse and the practical introduction of market processes in the social security system do not meet with much opposition.⁵ Nevertheless, family policy supporters challenge the individualization of social security rights, because so-called ‘bread winner facilities’ that grant additional allowances to workers who are responsible for their families have been abolished without reallocating the freed-up funds to the benefit of families. Other voices of resistance are heard from the opposite site, i.e. from supporters of the emancipation movement. Their protests concern the

misrecognition of the modern worker as a ‘worker with care tasks’. This novel construction of the modern worker encourages some feminist lawyers to argue in favor of a public insurance for care tasks (Holtmaat 1992, Westerveld 1999).

During the 1990s, more opponents enter the discourse. The Christian democrats, who are not part of the governing coalition for the first time since World War II, object to the increasing infiltration of the logic of the market into the social system during the reign of the ‘purple’ coalition (1994-2002) between the right wing liberals (VVD), left wing liberals (D66) and social democrats (PvdA). Among these Christian democratic opponents is future prime minister Jan Peter Balkenende, who contends: “for the [government] coalition, the introduction of market processes seems to provide inspiration for almost all policy fields” (Balkenende 2001, p. 232). He advocates an alternative perspective:

“Most people in society realize that the process of individualization has reached its limit. Society is being experienced as impersonal and people are looking for certainty, recognition and respect. People fear that the value of solidarity will vanish. Time pressure has increased. People identify less with their work and to a decreasing extent they strive for economic status.” (Balkenende 2001, p. 253)

In addition, two political parties that have been part of the ‘purple’ governmental coalition since 1994 share the criticism of the ‘marketization of society’. The PvdA, which has just shed its ‘ideological feathers’ during its ‘purple’ governmental years, reconsiders its political agenda and increasingly discards the introduction of market

processes in different segments of society. In the election program of the social democrats (2002-2006) we can read:

“Market processes have been the solution to all problems. We think that the citizen has an interest in more options and more quality. (...) After two decades of liberalization and privatization, experiences have not been altogether positive. The PvdA argues in favour of quality for everyone on the basis of solidarity. (...) We do not want a 24-hour economy, but a 24-hour good life.” (PvdA 2002a, p. 16)

Another coalition party, D66, argues in this regard in favor of less ideology and more pragmatism, which according to this party is embodied in a ‘life course perspective’:

“The pointless fight between public service and market will be left behind. Now it is time for creative politics. (...) We have to realize that individual choices are not without consequences for others. As a citizen and as a country we choose for more than our own interest in the short term.” (D66 2001, p.1)

“What matters in 2001 is to replace political, ideologically inspired perspectives with pragmatic perspectives. One of those perspectives is the perspective of the life course.” (D66 2001, p. 6)

In sum, the emergence of the ‘life course perspective’ in social security discourse can be situated in a shift from a corporatist welfare state towards a more liberal welfare state, which approaches social security increasingly in terms of economic incentives and disincentives, and individualized rights (instead of family based rights). Voices of resistance come, first of all, from family policy supporters and the feminist movement. In addition, some major political parties oppose the increased marketization of society.

Within this discursive field, the signifier ‘life course perspective’ is introduced. Before the spread of the ‘life course perspective’ is further explicated in section six, we first take a step back in the next section to study the ‘origins’ of the ‘life course perspective’.

5. The ‘life course perspective’ as a research practice

According to Foucault (1984), to understand our present regime of truth we have to investigate its ‘genealogical origins’ or its ‘conditions of the possibility’. Therefore, before the dispersion of the signifiers ‘life course’ and ‘life course perspective’ in the social security discourse is further investigated, this section studies the ‘genealogical’ origins of these signifiers.

Prior to the introduction of the signifier ‘life course perspective’ in social security discourse, this signifier is, above all, used in scientific research practices. The first research practices which are based upon the ‘life course perspective’ can be encountered in the United States just after World War II. The development of life course based research in this country seemed to have been conditioned upon the specific background situation of American society in that period: diverse demographic processes such as immigration and ageing in combination with the progress of new longitudinal research methods stimulate research on themes such as diversity and individual differences. Researchers become interested in the influence of these social changes on individual lives in particular. They incorporate a ‘life course perspective’ into their research to examine the patterns in the ways in which individuals construct their own life courses within historically determined constraints. This new approach in social research differs

significantly from that of classic social research, which rather focused upon abstractions and the development of grand theories (Elder *et al.* 2003).

In the 1980s, Dutch researchers also start to conduct quantitative analyses of life courses. Like their American colleagues, the Dutch researchers have become increasingly interested in studying individual processes instead of structures (Keilman 1986, Kuijsten 1986). In the late eighties and early nineties, a few Dutch researchers use life course research to counter the increasing dominance of the discourse on individualization. In their 'life course research' they demonstrate that the stage in which a person lives with his/her family not only remains an important stage in the lives of most individuals, but also that the disposable income during this stage of 'family life' is much lower than in the stages just before and after this period (Kronjee 1992, Kuijsten 1992, Latten, 1993, Van Leeuwen 1990). Paradoxically, these researchers use life course research to reveal individual lives in order to counter the individualization discourse.

Life course research is also valuable to the economic theory of human capital. Due to the introduction of human capital theory, which emerges in the 1960s, the focus shifts from abstract relationships between labor, capital and production to individual choices that affect the worth of human capital. In the 1980s, Dutch interest in economic life cycle research increases as some economists realize that human capital theory does not account for the different life cycles of men and women and the values of human capital that result from it (Schippers 1987).

More recently, the life cycle approach has been used in the field of labor market studies. Schmid (1995) has developed a 'transition model' of the labor market that visualizes individual life courses as transitions in individual lives where people shift

from fields such as care, training, sabbaticals and (early) pension to the labor market and vice versa. According to him, full employment must be possible if - measured on a life course basis - both men and women work an average of 30 hours per week. He further argues that temporary 'transitions' between different fields should be fostered in order to prevent 'structural unemployment'.

These examples show that life course research can be characterized by its attention to individual lives. Indeed, an essential aspect of life course research is that - in contrast to previous research - reality is constructed from the point of view of the individual whose decisions - which are made within historically and socially determined constraints - have an impact on herself and the world around her. As will be shown in the next two sections, this meaning of life course perspective in research practices (i.e., the attention for individual lives in relation to their historical and social context) leaves traces behind in the Dutch discourse on 'life course based policy'.

6. The dispersion of the life course perspective in social security discourse

This section examines how the 'life course perspective'—which, as we saw in last section originated in scientific practices—dispersed in social security discourse. Additionally, it will be considered why some key actors identified with these new signifiers.

The research revealed, first of all, that one of the factors that contributed to the relatively quick spreading of the new signifiers could be ascribed to the fact that there was no one 'singular origin' from which the signifiers infiltrated the discourse. As one interviewee stated: "It is not possible to tell who invented the 'life course perspective',

the idea of the life course perspective was suddenly there, out of the blue, the idea floated in the air.” Indeed, around the turn of the century diverging actors belonging to different political parties started to deploy the signifiers ‘life course’ and ‘life course perspective’ in social security discourse: (1) CDA, which sought to refurbish its traditional political agenda on family policy;⁶ (2) D66, which specifically invested in emancipation issues;⁷ and (3) somewhat later, the PvdA, which in that period demanded attention for its orientation to ‘third way’ politics.⁸ Thanks to a number of meetings attended by a broad range of political actors, the new signifiers circulate further in social security discourse.⁹ Some policy actors endorsing the life course perspective contributed to this dispersion because of their involvement in other influential institutions such as: (1) the Social Economic Council (SER),¹⁰ a tripartite commission that advises the government on issues of social policy and occasionally on emancipation policy; (2) the Temporary Expert Commission Emancipation (TECENA), a commission that encourages advisory commissions to address the emancipation aspects of proposed policy in their advice;¹¹ and (3) the Family Council.¹²

The new signifiers fell in particular on fertile ground with prominent members of the CDA. In addition, some actors concerned with emancipation policy - some of whom are affiliated with D66 - recognized the potential of the new signifiers. The remainder of this section examines, on the basis of the interview data, why these key actors were so attracted to the ‘life course perspective’.

Cuyvers, who was a member of the Family Council and an advisor to the CDA, contended that he wanted to prove that the stage of family life was still an important stage in most people’s lives. In fact, he used the signifier ‘life course perspective’ in the

same way as some Dutch life course researchers had applied it. That is, for him, “the life course had been the explanatory model to combat the ‘myth’ of individualization”.

Another Christian democrat, De Geus, who was Minister of Employment and Social Affairs between 2002 and 2007, also argued that he used the new signifier for strategic reasons. According to him, the ‘life course perspective’ could reconcile CDA’s traditional agenda on family life with modern society:

“We were looking for a concept that would express both the idea of family life and the (desired increased) labor participation of women. Where traditional ideas on the breadwinner society were not fruitful anymore, the concept of ‘life course’ felt as a lucky strike. We thought: now we have really discovered a strategic treasure, a concept that respects family life, that represents modernity, and that suits politics of reduced government.”

On the other hand, however, De Geus also felt that the introduction of the signifier ‘life course’ in social security discourse helped to structure modes of thinking in a new way and opened up possibilities to break through existing dichotomies:

“The name ‘life course’ was important to the CDA. We insisted that a new instrument of social security, which would address these objectives, carried the name ‘life course’, as the new instrument had to become an ‘image carrier of a new perspective, a new ambition’.”

This was confirmed by van Asselt, a member of the research institute for the CDA, who argued that “as a frame of mind, ‘life course’ totally disturbed the social security system”. The new concept was thus celebrated as an appealing invention that carried a promise for the future.

Economic scientist Bovenberg, advisor to the CDA, whom other interviewees credited with being the ‘father of the Life Course Arrangement’ also mentioned that the signifier ‘life course’ provided ‘an escape’:

“The initial reason that people started to think about the ‘life course perspective’ was to transcend the standard dichotomy between those who believe that children should be educated and raised within the realm of the family on one hand and those who argued that women should participate in the labor market on the other. Hence, the concept of ‘life course’ provided an escape from the ‘musty smell’ (...). In addition, the ‘life course’ concept sustained the activation of the system of social security and a way to reinvent the labor union and solidarity.”

Bovenberg further explained how the new signifiers helped him to reconcile his individual religious belief with his views on society:

“The term ‘life course’ involves the union of one’s individual interests with the interests of others: unity in diversity. There is always tension within a society: between individualization and collectivity, between left and right, between liberalism and socialism. However, at the same time they belong together; one cannot exist without the other. You can only become human if you also think about others; and you can only be a collective if people also think about themselves. Thus, there is no paradox at all between individuality and collectivity. Ultimately this is the Christian religion, God’s triad: God is one, but also diverse. (...) Therefore, the idea of ‘life courses’ should partake in a larger cultural offensive in which people are educated in social life. (..) Hence, what is important is not so much a new arrangement of social security, but a new perspective on one’s life. This means that people

invest in themselves, in their individual health, in their relationships; that they realize that they possess human capital and social capital.”

Hence, for Bovenberg the new signifiers did not only shape a new discourse on the social security system, it also helped to constitute a new united society.

A few actors concerned with emancipation issues also endorsed the new signifiers ‘life course’ and ‘life course perspective’. According to Schippers, a member of TECENA, the ‘life course perspective’ was in fact developed within ‘the emancipatory way of thinking’. In addition, Evenhuis, a member of TECENA and chairwoman of the national office for age discrimination, argued that for her “the ‘life course perspective’ opened up new possibilities, because this perspective threw new light on existing relationships and particularly provided *inspiration* for improving legislation and policy”. Wierda, an emancipation policymaker, emphasized the strategic advantages of the new signifiers as they facilitated the Department of Emancipation to distance itself from the anti-family feminist movement and to form a coalition with former opponents, such as the National Family Council. The new signifiers put emancipation policy in a new perspective:

“In the preceding years we had attempted in vain to include ‘care’ in the system of social security. We could not obtain sufficient political support for these plans. The life course offered a new way of integrating ‘care’ in the system of social security (...) We also distanced ourselves a bit from the anti-family feminist movement and looked for a broader coalition, and ended up with the concept of life courses. (...) We collaborated with the National Family Council. Our motto was: ‘If you can’t beat them, join them’.

In the early stages of emancipation policy it had been necessary to be anti-family, because at that time the traditional ideology on motherhood dominated the discourse. However, they kept on repeating this stance whereas, in my opinion, there is nothing wrong with a modern family. The Family Council was a good partner in our coalition, it strengthened our position.”

Furthermore, according to Wierda, the new signifiers offered new impulses for reform:

“The life course perspective was a concept that provided emancipation policy with new impulses. The old debates were dominated by ‘individualization of the system of social security’. Since you were either an opponent or a supporter of ‘individualization’, this debate was paralyzed. The life course perspective offered new opportunities.”

In summary, the interviews show that strategic reasoning was important with respect to the introduction of the new signifiers. The actors used the signifiers to promote their own body of thought. On the other hand, the signifiers affected the discourse in other ways also: they entailed a promise for change, served as inspiration for reform of the social security system and gave shape to a new, emerging discourse.

7. Analysis of the texts

The new signifiers popped up in a number of texts, reaching a peak around the year 2001. The heuristic questions that were introduced in the third section form the starting point for the analysis of eleven selected texts. The analysis was guided by the main research question that was formulated in section two: “What was the role of the new signifiers, ‘life course’ and ‘life course perspective’ in the process of policy change?”. Section 7.1

addresses the question how the selected texts were constituted. For this purpose the argumentation strategies of all texts were analyzed. As was explained in section 3, the texts that were selected for further analysis entailed, next to three basic texts, eight other texts that originated from five actors who presented different views on the ‘life course perspective’. Section 7.2 and 7.3 investigates more in detail the argumentative strategies, nomination strategies and predication strategies that are used in these texts. As such section 7.2 reveals how the texts diverge. Section 7.3, on the other hand, points at some important convergences between the texts. Section 7.4 summarizes the main conclusions that can be drawn from the textual analysis.

7.1 The constitution of reality in the texts

In order to figure out which signifiers were constitutive of the text, the main claims made in each text were listed. The texts, first of all, appeared to deploy similar argumentative strategies: after a description of main social trends, existing institutions were problematized and proposals for institutional reforms were made. In fact, the claims could be categorized according to the following categories: *social trends* (and threats) such as ageing, individualization, globalization, and the increased labor participation of women; *problematization of those trends*, involving an account of their expected negative consequences; *undesired reality*, enfolding an unattractive picture of a (static) future social system; and finally, *desired reality* in which we encounter a more dynamic social security system that is tailored to the described social trends. The argumentation strategy thus followed the structure of a ‘narrative of control’, which after telling what is going wrong, offers some possibilities of interference (Stone 1988). Section 7.2

examines in more detail what ‘narratives of control were told in the investigated documents.

The analysis of the argumentation strategies according to the aforementioned categories revealed that the signifier ‘life course’ was frequently present in all different types of claims. Moreover, in most cases the signifier ‘life course’ and related signifiers (‘period of life’, ‘transitions’ and ‘life patterns’) dominated the argument. The analysis of one of the three basic texts on life course policy, the CDA document, can serve as an illustration. Table 1 shows how the main claims in the text were listed according to the categories *social trends*, *problematization of social trends*, *undesired reality* and *desired reality*. In each category most of the claims included the words ‘life course’ or acquainted words, such as ‘periods in life’ or ‘stages in life’. These claims were listed first. The second part of each category comprises the main claims in the text that did not refer to these new signifiers. The CDA document starts with a description of *social trends*. As the table shows, almost all ‘social trends’ refer to the emergence of a ‘modern life course’. This ‘modern’ or ‘changed life course’ is problematized, because people have to combine more activities - work, care and education/training - in the same ‘stage of life’, which gives rise to ‘financial, economic and emotional problems’ (*problematization*). Most important, current institutions cannot accommodate ‘modern life courses’ as they are still tailored to the ‘standard life course’ (*undesired reality*). The document further designs some future social security institutions that address the diversity of labor participation and the preservation of employability during the entire ‘life course’ (*desired reality*).

The textual analysis thus shows how the world becomes meaningful from the perspective of ‘life course’. From the textual analysis of the other texts similar conclusions could be drawn. That is, in most selected texts trends, threats and reform were approached in terms of ‘life courses’ or related signifiers, such as ‘periods of life’, ‘life patterns’ and ‘transitions in life’.

Table 1. Argumentation strategies CDA (2001)

categories	Main claims in the text
Social trends	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -increased prosperity has affected the life course; -although there is more time and space for different choices in the life course, people are still devoted to the values and norms that are attached to the existing institutions; in addition, a sense for community remains important; -in the modern life course the stage of family life remains dominant; -in the modern life course people combine more activities; -in the modern life course the division of roles between men and women is getting less clear; -compared to the traditional life course, the modern life course contains two extra periods; <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -modern society can be characterized with trends as globalization, technological developments, ageing; -As a result of modern society the removal of the traditional religious and political barriers the emphasis has shifted to individual life designs;
Problematic social trends	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -because of the changed life courses the interests of children and the interests of people in need of care and others are endangered; -because of a diversity in life courses and an increase in activities, ‘leaves’ have to be bridged; -families can be conceived as the losers within the life course;

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - in the period of family life people suffer a loss of income; this also affects the life of the children; -new life courses cause pressure to achieve and increased insecurity; -the overstrained labor market and the new life course cause problems in financial, economic and emotional realms;
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - a lot of women and men are not able to realize their desired family ideal; - the Dutch knowledge economy has a shortage of well educated people
Undesired reality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -institutions are tailored to the standard life course; -labor market policy does not conjure up with developments in the life course (transitions, lifelong learning); -the social security system and collective labor arrangements are still tailored to the traditional life course as a result of which it is difficult to combine diverse activities in the life course and people are insufficiently protected; -the social security system is insufficiently tailored to the modern life course, particularly in regard of different labor patterns and the need for education; -the one-sided attention for the economic independence of women injures the desires in relation to the modern life course, particularly in the period of family life;
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -problems arise in case the government disposes of relations of mutual solidarity; -science was wrong to picture the citizen as a rational economic person; -it was wrong to limit labor market policy to the realm of the factory;
Desired realities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Institutions should become more tailored to increase the diversity of labor participation during the life course without dispersing the realm of income, career perspective and family; -Employability and education during the period in the life course that people participate in the labor market should become more and more important.

In addition to the analysis of argumentative strategies, the main nomination strategies and predication strategies in all eleven texts were categorized. This analysis

revealed that terms such as ‘life course perspective’, ‘modern life course’, ‘transitional labor markets’ and ‘perspective on labor patterns’ were put into a chain of equivalences with words like ‘modern’, ‘dynamic’, ‘diversity’, ‘free choice’ and ‘change’. A contrasting chain of equivalences was built among words such as ‘traditional life course’ and ‘standard life course’, which were associated with words like ‘static’, ‘role patterns’ and ‘clear activities’. These specific forms of argumentation thus foregrounded the new and dynamic aspects of ‘the modern life course’. Since the construction of these opposing chains of equivalences constituted both the desired system of social security and the undesired system of social security, the new signifiers gave new meaning to the signifier ‘social security’. That is to say, the signifier ‘social security’ was now understood in relation to its effects on individual ‘life courses’.

In sum, from the analysis of the texts it can be concluded that the signifier ‘life course’ constituted a new world. Trends, problems, undesired and desired realities, including the undesired and desired social security system, became meaningful in relation to a new chain of equivalences that was established around the signifier ‘life course’.

7.2 Different meanings of life course policy

The analysis of the eight texts that originated from five key actors revealed that, notwithstanding a similar constitution (‘life course’), the texts differed in important aspects. That is, the identification of ‘social trends’, ‘problematization of those trends’, ‘undesired realities’ and ‘desired realities’ revealed five different ‘narrative of control’, which filled the signifier ‘life course’ with different meaning.

Table 2 shows that five different narrative could be distinguished: the ‘family life narrative’, the ‘diversity narrative’, the ‘emancipation narrative’, the ‘human capital narrative’ and the ‘new risks narrative’. Each of these narratives contained a different storyline and, accordingly filled the signifier ‘life course perspective’ with different meaning. The *family life narrative* problematizes the period in life during which one or two parents have to take care of their children because of a financial shortage. The problem can be solved in case time and money are redistributed during the life course. The ‘life course perspective’ thus refers to the ‘income gap’ that citizens experience during the stage of family life. The *diversity narrative* disputes the fact that social security institutions are still based on standard male life courses, while at the same time life courses of women have become more diverse. It is argued that social security institutions should anticipate on these diversified lives. Accordingly, the ‘life course perspective’ views and celebrates the diverse lives of women. The *emancipation narrative* argues for the facilitation of leave arrangements, which enhances the female labor market participation. Within this narrative the ‘life course perspective’ involves the view on ‘transitions’ of workers between the spheres of paid work and care. The *human capital narrative* problematizes the depreciation of human capital in current social security system. According to this narrative, human capital is the key to labor participation. The ‘life course perspective’ refers to a perspective on the depreciation and investments in human capital during the life course. In the *new risks narrative* it is argued that it is inefficient to base the social security system on ‘external risks’, because it is clear that in modern society people to a great extent are able to influence risks of unemployment and/or having children. Shifting the emphasis to manufactured risks (i.e.

‘internal risks) will result in a stimulation of labor market participation. In this narrative the ‘life course perspective shows how life courses increasingly become the product of ones own choices.

Taken together the narratives told two different stories. On the one hand, ‘the life course perspective’ revealed how the labor market participation could be increased. On the other hand, the ‘life course perspective’ expressed the desire to increase the quality of life. As such, the narratives seemed to be partly continuous and partly discontinuous with the dominant social security discourse at that time. On the one hand, then, the narratives that argued for an increased labor market participation along with a more efficient social security system, ‘human capital’ and ‘new risks’, pursued the dominant social security discourse. On the other hand, the narratives ‘family life’ and ‘diversity’, which emphasized the quality of life would also entail the facilitation of the preferences of those who, for various reasons, prefer – in some periods in their lives - to spend their time with other activities than (only) paid work. These narratives thus endorsed the counter discourses. The narrative ‘emancipation’ occupied a middle position in this respect, as this narrative dealt with both the (desired) increased labor market participation and the issue of combining this increased labor market participation with care activities.

Table 2. Five narratives

Key signifier	Narrative	Meaning of the life course perspective
Family life	<p>Parents are not (financially) capable of caring for their children; a ‘family gap’ is emerging.</p> <p>Therefore, a redistribution should take place of the peak load in time and money during the life course.</p>	<p>Perspective to view the income gap during the stage of family life</p>
Diversity	<p>Social security institutions are based on the standard male life course, whereas life courses (in particular those of women) and desires have become more diverse. These institutions should anticipate on the diverse range of activities that people (whish to) perform within one life period.</p>	<p>Perspective to view (and celebrate) the diverse life courses of women</p>
Emancipation	<p>Institutions of social security and labor market policy are insufficiently tailored to the increased labor market participation of women. Social security should be based on transitional labor markets that facilitate leave arrangements for both men and women.</p>	<p>Perspective to analyze the transitions of men and women between the spheres of paid work and care</p>
Human capital	<p>The current social security system stimulates the depreciation of human capital. Human capital is the key to the desired labor participation. A system of social security that is based upon investments in human capital</p>	<p>Perspective to view the investments and depreciation of human capital</p>

	should depart from a better spread of education, work, care and spare time over a life course.	
New risks	Although consciousness has grown that people can influence risks to a great extent, the social security system is still based on the idea of external risks. In regard of the growing importance of manufactured risks, the system of social security should be based increasingly on investment incentives and individual responsibility.	Perspective that enables one to view the life course as an individual product in which the individual makes his/her own risk based decisions

7.3 Convergence between the narratives

Despite the evident differences and - in some cases - incompatibilities between the new (policy) narratives that accompanied the introduction of the new signifier ‘life course perspective’, section 7.1 suggested that the introduction of this new signifier established a common vocabulary that constituted a common discourse. This section presents some additional convergences between the different identified narratives.

In the first place, as the analysis of predication strategies in Table 3 demonstrates, the different texts endorsed a similar construction of the subject. That is, the signifiers ‘life course perspective’ and ‘life course’ promoted new subject constructions that slightly differed from the earlier rational calculating subject. To begin with, the two narratives that continued the former discourse - ‘human capital’ and ‘new risks’ - partly replaced and partly completed the picture of the calculating subject with a new type of rational acting subject. This newly constructed subject is, above all, capable of planning

his/her entire life based on his/her preferences. As such, within the ‘human capital’ narrative the individual and/or the worker is constructed as a *‘flexible entrepreneur’* that ‘invests in his/her own capital and that of his/her children’ and is *responsible* for dividing his/her income during the life course. The ‘new risks’ narrative which also constructs the individual/worker as an *‘entrepreneur* that works on his/her own competences’, emphasizes in particular the relationship between this *entrepreneurship* and *risk behavior*, implying that the *entrepreneurial worker* must be viewed more and more as a *consumer* in the social security market. In addition, subjects who are not yet capable of making their individual life plan must be either ‘empowered’ to make autonomous decisions (Schippers 2001) or ‘educated’ through savings systems within the social security system (Bovenberg 2003).

Even the narratives that represented former voices of resistance – ‘family life’ and ‘diversity’ - endorsed this ‘subject of choices’ who continuously weighs his/her preferences against the expected costs. Then, according to the ‘family life’ narrative, the individual/worker ‘must have *more choices* with regard to *investments* in family life and labor participation’. In addition the ‘diversity’ narrative emphasizes that individuals/workers need to balance their lives between *‘their own interests and preferences* and those of their partner, children and others’.

Table 3. The construction of the subject in the different narratives

Narrative	Individuals/Workers
Family life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - live mostly in the realm of a family; - increasingly endorse the principles of emancipation, freedom of choice, and individualization; - must have more choices with regard to investments in family life and labor participation;
Diversity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - have a 'double loyalty' in their life course: their own interests and preferences and those of their partner, children and others;
Emancipation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - have an interest in more freedom of choice with respect to their own life course; - must be empowered to participate in the labor market;
Human capital	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - need to be flexible; - behave as entrepreneurs; - must invest in their own human capital and that of their children; - are responsible for dividing their income during their life course;
New risks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - want to take more risks and responsibility for social risks; - need incentives to continue working and refrain from welfare facilities; - must permanently work on their competences; - must behave as entrepreneurs; - must be new consumers in transparent markets for care, education and social security.

Secondly, the new signifiers pointed to a shared discourse that 'Dutch people have always taken care of their children by themselves and that they desire to continue this way of life'. This discourse endorses part of the earlier criticism from both feminists

and supporters of family policy, because it acknowledges the problem that accompanies the combination of paid work and unpaid care activities. As a matter of fact, all narratives more or less problematize the ‘double tasking’ of workers, usually women. The analysis of predication strategies revealed that 8 out of 11 analyzed documents, which included all distinguished storylines, endorsed this desire for having more time for bringing up the children. This is illustrated in a number of quotes in Table 4. Furthermore, the outcome of the research provides evidence that the introduction of the signifiers ‘life course’ and ‘life course perspective’ initiated some discursive interchange between former voices of resistance that appealed to family values and care tasks and the dominant social security discourse in the mid-1990s. For example, whereas in the mid-1990s PvdA and D66, parties in the governmental coalition between 1994 and 2002, had openly rejected family policy, in 2002 the facilitation of family life was one of the themes in the election campaigns of these parties (De Hoog and Hooghiemstra 2002).

The construction of a common ‘(responsible) subject of choices’ and the desire ‘to care for the children by ourselves’ suggest that the signifiers ‘life course’ and ‘life course perspective’ not only constituted a new social security discourse, they also seem to have created a new space of representation in which the ‘subject of choices’ was joined with a ‘Dutch desire to care for the children by themselves’. In this new space of representation it was possible to represent the potential beneficiaries of the social security system as both fellow citizens in need of collective support and as self-interested consumers. As such, the values of solidarity and efficiency were united in a common discourse.

Table 4. Care for children as a common discourse

“We all want to stay strongly involved in the upbringing of our children” (Leynse 2001a);

“Compared with other European countries the Netherlands is a country of people who combine different tasks” (Bovenberg 2003);

“The Dutch people strongly desire (at least partly) to take care of their children by themselves” (Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment 2002);

“Abolition of breadwinner facilities without creating new care facilities can endanger social cohesion” (SER 2001);

“The majority of the population still thinks that family situations where both parents work full-time are not preferable” (CDA 2001);

“People face a double loyalty, they have to be available for paid labor and for care” (Evenhuis 1999);

“New slogan: 32 hours while retaining the kids” (Schippers 2001).

7.4 Main conclusions with respect to the textual analysis

The textual analysis revealed, first of all, that the signifiers ‘life course’ and ‘life course perspective’ constituted the texts. That is, in these texts the world is viewed from the perspective of the ‘life course’. As a result, the signifier ‘social security’ now becomes

meaningful in its relationship with these new signifiers. The textual analysis also revealed that the meaning of the 'life course perspective' depended on the partly incompatible narratives within which it was expressed. Whereas some of these narratives reflected the dominant social security discourse at that time, other narratives rather endorsed the counter discourses. The analysis thus suggests that this signifier 'life course perspective' was able to unite partly incompatible discourses. On the basis of the last part of the analysis it was concluded that a synthesis between the different narratives was also furthered because of the creation of a new space of representation in which the 'subject of choices' was joined with the 'Dutch desire to care for the children by themselves'.

8. The 'life course perspective' and the act of naming

How can we interpret the outcome of this study in the perspective of poststructuralist discourse theory? First of all, this study has demonstrated that, instead of merely being instruments of external persuasion, the new signifiers 'life course' and 'life course perspective' were constitutive of the construction of undesired and desired reality and consequently filled the signifier 'social security' with new meaning. The creation of a common vocabulary and the resulting interdiscursive communication between former dominant discourses and counter discourses seems to have created something new: the act of naming established a new perspective on social security, a perspective that created unity among a variety of discourses and counter discourses, which would address the need for an enhanced (individual responsibility for) labor participation in a way that did not negatively affect the quality of lives of individuals who preferred to participate in non-paid work activities.

The analysis further suggests that naming the desired changes ‘life course’ policy involved a catachretic name, because there was no other representation that could replace this new mode of social policy. This act of naming brought into being ‘something’ that had already been there in counter discourses, but that had not been properly worked out yet, for the lack of representation. The problem of connecting a finite number of words and the infinite number of things in the world was solved by transposing the signifier ‘life course perspective’ from the sphere of research practices to social security discourse. Following Laclau, it can be argued that this catachretic act of naming fostered new ways of reasoning that were essential for the production of ‘new spaces of representation’ that sustain new discourses and new coalitions. This new space of representation imagined a ‘subject of choices’ that prefers ‘to take care of its own children’. Within this new space of representation a reformed social security system would both stimulate labor market participation and improve quality of life for all Dutch citizens. As such, values as solidarity and efficiency were united in a common ‘life course based discourse’.

The case study also endorses Laclau’s and Norval’s ideas that the identification with new signifiers produces affect that contributes to policy change. First of all, actors could identify with the new signifiers, ‘life course’ and ‘life course perspective’, because they recognized that they provided a way out of their old discursive positions; they held a promise of something new. The signifiers appealed to ‘aspect dawning’, capturing a feeling of surprise or excitement that can be described by a sentence like “now we have got it”. This first moment of surprise, seems to have provided the energy for the establishment of this discourse. In addition, Bovenberg’s conflation of ‘life course’ with ‘unity in diversity’ provides evidence for the assumption that the act of naming responds

to a subconscious desire for fullness. The fact that the new signifiers addressed formerly opposed narratives further supports this conclusion. That is, the new discourse was structured around the fantasy that increased labor participation and more time for care or leisure do not cancel each other out. The new rhetoric also closed the new spaces of representation that it just had created. For example, endorsing the fantasy that all subjects are driven by choices, alternative subject constructions were foreclosed. Thus the act of naming the new social policy ‘life course policy’ comprised a fantasmatic dimension which, as Glynos and Howarth have argued, provides a ground for critique.

In sum, as the new policy was called ‘life course policy’, the dominant social security discourse was constituted in a new way, containing both the former dominant discourse and the voices of resistance. The catachretic act of naming produced new spaces of representation within which (partly) incompatible goals and values were united. Actors identified with these new signifiers because they contained a promise, a way out of the old, dead-end discursive positions. Hence, this study suggests that the introduction of the new signifiers ‘life course’ and ‘life course perspective’ contributed to an important, albeit temporary, policy change in which the emphasis shifted from a policy informed by the values of the market to a work-life balance policy.

9. Concluding observations

Along with the analysis in section 9, some additional conclusions can be drawn from this study. First of all, this study has demonstrated that a discourse theoretical analysis of the use of rhetoric contributes to the explanation of policy change. This is not to say, however, that other approaches that are based on a ‘post-positivist paradigm of

explanation' are rejected.¹³ The study rather suggests that a discourse analysis of rhetoric may be used together with other explanatory approaches, on the condition that their ontological assumptions are adjusted to discourse theory.

Secondly, some additional comments can be made with respect to catachresis. Whereas catachresis involves "the use of a figural term when there is no literal term that can replace it", this study also showed that the transposition of a signifier from one sphere to another sphere leaves traces behind in the latter sphere. Indeed, it was possible to observe some convergences between the meaning of life course perspective in specific research practices and in social security discourse. In the first place, like social scientific life course research, the 'diversity narrative' and the 'new risks narrative' endorsed concrete individual persons as basic ontological categories. Secondly, like recent Dutch life course research, the 'family life narrative' took the individual family as a basic ontological category. And finally, like economic life cycle research and the research on transitional labor markets, the 'human capital narrative', the 'emancipation narrative' and the 'new risks narrative' viewed the individual lives of men and women as 'transitions' between different domains. In addition, both the discourse on a 'life course based system' and the life course research practices were sustained by the same individualization discourse. This relationship between the meaning of the signifiers in the first sphere and the transposed (catachretic) sphere, needs to be developed further.

The case study further revealed that DHA provides useful tools for a poststructuralist rhetorical analysis. The analysis of the nomination strategies, predication strategies and argumentative strategies of the selected texts were in particular useful for the analysis of the constitution of the new discourse. In addition, the analysis

of argumentation strategies proved to be helpful for deciphering (policy) narratives. As such, DHA might also be useful for interpretative policy analysis. Nonetheless, more methodological tools are needed to conduct thorough empirical research based on poststructuralist discourse theory, in particular, with respect to the relationship between affect and policy change. This paper therefore encourages scholars to engage in poststructuralist empirical studies to further develop empirical research methods.

In sum, though there is still a lot of work to be done to translate discourse theoretical conceptions to less abstract methodological tools, the case of the emergence of Dutch life course policy has shown that discourse theory can certainly contribute to an explanation of policy change that is rooted in a post-positivist paradigm of explanation.

¹ Glynos and Howarth (2007) distinguish the post positivist paradigm of explanation from the positivist paradigm of explanation. In this latter mode of reasoning that is predominantly used in natural sciences, deduction assumes a prominent role. That is, a theory is being accepted as long as the falsifiable hypotheses are not disproved by the observed facts. Within this mode of reasoning explanation and prediction are closely connected. As Glynos and Howarth argue, this model does not suffice in social sciences, because, in contrast to the natural world, the social world is an open system within which it is not possible to conduct closed experiments. In other words, there exists no constitutive link between explanation and prediction. According to Glynos and Howarth, a post positivist paradigm of explanation involves, amongst others 'involves a to-and-fro movement between the phenomena investigated and the various explanations that are proffered. In this way, an initially chaotic set of concepts, logics, empirical data, self-interpretations, and so on, at varying levels of abstraction, are welded together, so as to produce an account which, if it removes our initial confusion, can constitute a legitimate candidate for truth or falsity' (2007, p. 33-4).

² CDA (2001), Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment (2002) and SER (2001).

³ Bovenberg (2001, 2003), Cuyvers (1996), Evenhuis (1999a, 1999b), Leynse (2001a, 2001b) and Schippers (2001).

⁴ See also Montesano Montessori (2009).

⁵ Van Gestel *et al.* suggest that a consensus could be formed because the most important coalition partners of the purple government, the socialist PvdA and the liberal VVD, interpreted concepts such as 'the introduction of market processes' in different ways (2010 p.94).

⁶ See CDA (2001).

⁷ See D66 (2001).

⁸ See PvdA (2002b).

⁹ October 1999 (Parliament) and 16th of March 2001 (SER), conferences organized by the Joke Smit Stichting (non-governmental emancipatory institution). First of February 2002 (Department of Emancipation), expert meeting organized by the Department of Emancipation, The Netherlands Institute

for Social Research (SCP) and the Dutch National Family Council (NGR). These meetings were followed by others, such as conferences organized by social partners on the 26th of February 2002 and 27th of March 2002. Participants included, among others, representatives of diverse political parties; representatives of social partners; experts (governmental advisors); representatives of non-governmental organizations (including SCP and NGR), and public officials.

¹⁰ Goudswaard (affiliated with D66), Bovenberg (affiliated with CDA) and Leynse (affiliated with PvdA) all endorsed the new signifiers and were Crown-appointed members of the SER. In a 2001 SER document on the future of employment policy, 'life course perspective' is a central signifier (SER, 2001).

¹¹ Evenhuis and Schippers, affiliated with D66 and members of TECENA, endorsed the new signifiers.

¹² Cuyvers, affiliated with CDA, was a staff member of the Family Council.

¹³ For example, Hajer's concept of storyline and discourse coalitions can also add to the explanation of the emergence of a life course discourse in the Netherlands (Eleveld 2012).

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